

# Remembering 'LH'

DU Beck Archives

# REUNION

## Progeny of Denver's 'Golden Eagle' Leopold H. Guldman

By CHRIS LEPPEK

**L**eopold Guldman is no longer of this world.

His bones repose in Emanuel Cemetery, and have done so these past 84 years.

The business he founded and tirelessly promoted, the Golden Eagle Dry Goods Co., has been gone for nearly as long. Its once imposing edifice in downtown Denver, with airy display windows on the street level and a proud

eagle adorning its five-story summit, was reduced to rubble decades ago. In its place stands the sleek and modern Tabor Center, named, ironically enough, for a man Guldman once knew.

The business Guldman excelled at and became famous for — the once indomitable department store — has changed immensely since his day, and is facing challenges from new forms of

marketing and sales he never could have dreamed of.

Even the sort of man that Guldman was — someone who immigrated to America alone at the age of 17 with scarcely a nickel in his pocket, with no knowledge of English, and who ended up as one of Denver's wealthiest and most philanthropic figures — is an

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A later-period photo of the former Golden Eagle building at 16th and Lawrence Sts., dating to the 1960s, shows Miller Western Wear as the primary tenant. Now the Tabor Center stands on the property.

Library of Congress

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anachronism, the sort of character who showed up in novels by Horatio Alger and other 19th-century authors.

So, in more ways than one, Guldman is no longer of this world.

But as a Zoom session earlier this month — attended by more than 50 of his descendants, representing six generations — clearly demonstrated, Mr. Guldman is far from forgotten.

**O**n June 7, Glen Friedman of Los Angeles and his sister, Rabbi Dayle Friedman of Philadelphia, hosted a Zoom call in honor of the 150th anniversary of the immigration to America of their great-grandfather, Leopold Guldman, in 1870.

The siblings, children of Audrey Friedman Marcus of Denver and the late Don Friedman, originally intended to host the event in-person this summer in Denver, but the coronavirus pandemic put the kibosh on those plans.

Rather than wait for a later opportunity, they opted to go for

a virtual gathering, Glen Friedman told the **INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS** earlier this month via phone.

"I had an epiphany that we could do this with Zoom," he says, "and it turned out to be a better approach since we had much better participation than we would have had if we'd stuck to the original plan. The technology lent itself to the event."

Friedman, who runs a strategic consulting company in LA, was amazed at the turnout for the Zoom event — more than 50 participants, featuring members of four of the five families who descended from Guldman's five children. A total of six generations (one infant constituted the sixth) were represented

with participants hailing from four countries and 12 American states.

It was a "big success," says Friedman, who acknowledges that he assumed the role of ringmaster for the virtual gathering.

He began preparing for the event months ago, starting with a list of relatives he knew and delving into online data bases to find new branches of the family tree. Eventually, he was able to make contact with members of all five descendant fam-

## Denver's Horatio Alger story

ilies.

"It was organic," he says of the process, "finding people who found other people. It spread out that way."

Most of those who participated had at least some knowledge of who their ancestor was and what he accomplished — albeit in limited detail — while some of the younger participants were largely unaware of Guldman but curious to find out.

To fill in the blanks and answer the many questions that appeared on participants' computer or smartphone screens, the Friedman siblings included Dr. Jeanne Abrams, director of the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society and Beck Archives, who gave a presentation on Guldman's biography and a history of his business career.

When Friedman, 61, was asked why he is so fascinated by an ancestor who died more than two decades before he was born — and whom, he believes,



**Glen Friedman**



**Rabbi Dayle Friedman**

virtually nobody who is alive today can actually remember — he replies straightforwardly.

"I've had an interest in the family history and the story of LH for a long time," he says, using initials to refer to Guldman. "I really admire him."

"When I read that my great-grandfather came to this country 150 years ago I thought we should do something to

commemorate that fact."

His admiration is based on three aspects of his great-grandfather's legacy, which is also how he loosely structured the Zoom call:

- the fact that Guldman was community-minded, as evidenced by his significant and sustained support for charitable causes, including several seminal

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A 1903 Golden Eagle ad in a Denver newspaper uses typically hyperbolic language in its effort to sell muslin underwear.

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Denver Jewish institutions;

- his success as an entrepreneur, as verified by the prominent role his Golden Eagle store played in Denver's commercial landscape; and
- his courage.

"He came to this country as a 17-year-old and made his way to Wisconsin," Friedman explains. "He had to learn English, he took lots of business risks. When I think of a 17-year-old starting from scratch, making his own way and ending up being a very successful man, I think it must have taken a lot of courage."

An independent businessman himself, Friedman respects Guldman for being in the right place at the right time

and taking full advantage of the opportunities that circumstance placed before him.

**A**s Abrams discussed via Zoom, Guldman's primary historical legacy was the Golden Eagle. While the store had to compete with such early Denver powerhouses as the May Company and Daniels & Fisher, the Golden Eagle under Guldman found a niche with its wide variety and comparatively low prices on most of its inventory, although it also kept a substantial stock of high-end merchandise, both to appeal to better-heeled customers and to embellish its reputation as a prestigious outlet.

Guldman, however, always saw him-

self as a merchant of the common man.

Blue collar workers were always welcome at his store, as were women, for whom the Golden Eagle devoted entire floors of merchandise, mainly clothing and household items.

Many minorities also made Golden Eagle their store of choice.

Denver's Chinese community, in particular, was said to be loyal to the Golden Eagle because Guldman had been widely credited with saving the life of a Chinaman who was being chased by a violent mob during one of Denver's infamous anti-Chinese riots. According to the oft-cited legend, he accomplished this by hiding the man in a merchandise box.

"The Chinese community was very loyal to the store," Friedman says. "He also kind of bridged the West Side and East Side of the Denver Jewish community."

As a German immigrant and a successful businessman, Guldman most comfortably fit the profile of an East Side Jew, but he had a soft spot for the mainly Orthodox, Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews of the West Side, and hired many of them.

That, along with Guldman's generous philanthropy to such West Side institutions as Beth Israel Hospital and Old Folks Home (the forerunner of today's Shalom Park), the Jewish Consumptives Relief Society and the Guldman Jewish Community Center (named in honor of his daughter Louise and a forerunner of today's JCC) did not go unnoticed by West Side Jews. They returned the favor by shopping at his store.

"The Golden Eagle was really a store for the masses," Friedman says. "LH was very good at buying inventory, usually at low prices and in large quantities. He was a very good buyer, a very good merchant, period. So in some ways it was like Sears, while some have



Mrs. Leopold Guldman, circa 1915

described it as the Walmart of its day with a wide selection and good competitive prices."

Some of his contemporaries compared Guldman to circus magnate P.T. Barnum, Friedman says. Both were inveterate showmen and promoters. Guldman was innovative and relentless in pitching his wares to the public though never-ending sales and regular showy ads in Denver's daily newspapers.

Much of what is remembered about Guldman today is the stuff of myth, acknowledges Friedman, who says that his great-grandfather was the sort of figure who inspired grand anecdotes.

The "family folklore" is full of stories about Guldman's ostentatious personality, his friendship with silver barons and other tycoons, his uncanny business acumen.

Even during the recent Zoom call, Friedman says he heard stories about Guldman that sounded like tall tales.

"There were things that people told me that I hadn't heard before," Friedman says, "some of which I'm not so sure are true."

Noting that Guldman was physically diminutive — some accounts say he topped out only an inch or two above five feet — his reputation was anything but small.

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**The Guldman family mansion on Humboldt Street overlooked Cheesman Park and occupied six city lots.**

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"He was a tiny man," Friedman says, "but bigger than life."

**F**ollowing in the footsteps of many of his German Jewish countrymen, Guldman left his native land at a young age, bound for the promise of America.

Born in Harburg, Bavaria in 1852, the son of a kosher butcher, his childhood has never been chronicled in detail but it can be ascertained that his mother passed away when Leopold was seven years old, that his family were observant Jews, that they contended with poverty and official discrimination, as did most of the Jews of that place and time.

He was 17 years old on June 15, 1870 when he disembarked in New York, having made the trans-Atlantic voyage on his own. He stayed there briefly before heading for Chicago and then Watertown, Wis., where his sister and brother-in-law had already settled.

In that small Wisconsin town, Guldman worked in his brother-in-law's dry goods store, learning English and mercantile skills that would prove invaluable in his later life. In 1877,

he set out for Colorado, lured by tales of quick fortunes being made in gold and silver, and settled in Leadville, at the time a rough-and-tumble boomtown.

It appears that he quickly gave up dreams of quick riches in silver and set up shop selling basic goods to miners, soon setting up a similar business in another Colorado boomtown, Cripple Creek.

The earnings he made from those early enterprises allowed Guldman to move to Denver in 1879, where, at the age of 26, he founded the Golden Eagle Dry Goods Co., the young city's first bargain-oriented department store.

Starting out in a small storefront at 16th and Lawrence

Streets, it didn't take long for the store to take off. Selling mostly mass-produced merchandise and specializing in women's ready-to-wear attire, the Golden Eagle drew customers steadily, allowing Guldman to purchase adjacent land and, over time, to expand his building.

It eventually mushroomed into what one writer of the era called a "palace of consumption," occupying most of the block on which it stood and featuring plentiful windows with creatively arranged displays and the best lighting available —

both gaslight and electric — illuminating an elegant and spacious interior.

Historian Abrams, in an extensive article on Guldman she wrote for the Immigrant Entrepreneurship website, cited several factors that were key to the businessman's success.

Guldman was an early practitioner of the "economies of scale" approach to retail, which basically means to buy in large quantities and at low prices and then pass those savings on to customers, thereby undercutting the competition.

He was an expert in securing merchandise from manufacturers, middlemen and other retailers who were facing bankruptcy or other business woes, or who might have experienced damage from fires or floods, often purchasing everything they had to sell.

He filled the Golden Eagle with these acquisitions and offered them at the best prices in town, ensuring that customers of modest means could afford them, fully understanding that "loss leader" tactics — selling certain products at little or no profit, or even below profit — was a surefire way of drawing patrons into the store and building customer loyalty.

The key to all of these tactics was promotion, at which Guldman was an undisputed master.

He bought thousands of column inches in Denver's dailies for eye-catching and ostentatious advertisements that featured



In this 1920s-era photo, Leopold Guldman looks every bit the successful tycoon that he was.  
DU Beck Archives

such lines as "the Largest and most Complete Line of Foreign and American Dresses," "the Greatest Saturday Night Sale

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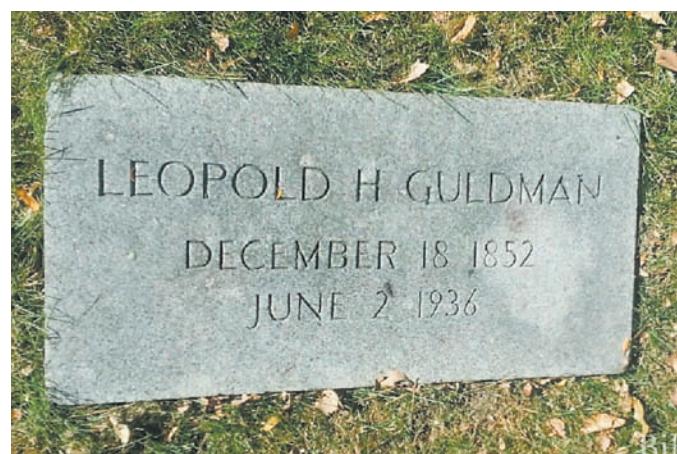


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Leopold Guldman's tombstone in Denver's Emanuel Cemetery is modest, unadorned

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Yet," "Competition Completely Outdone," "Goods Almost Given Away," and "the grandest, the greatest, the most sensational of all sales."

Guldman wrote much of the exclamatory ad copy himself, demonstrating what Abrams called "sheer verve and bravado" in outshining his competitors.

Not surprisingly, it all paid off very handsomely for Guldman.

In 1920, the Golden Eagle's best year, the store generated nearly \$2.5 million in sales, an astronomical sum for the day. He invested heavily in property and became one of the city's leading bankers, thus growing his fortune significantly.

He, his wife Bertha and their five children lived in opulent mansions, first in Capitol Hill and then in a sprawling six-lot estate overlooking Cheesman Park.

Guldman was not only a "merchant prince," the **Denver Post** once wrote of him, but "one of the West's outstanding men."

**T**wilight came for the Golden Eagle during the 1930s when a combination of factors — Guldman's failing health, his outmoded "cash only" method of doing business and the Great Depression among them — led to the flamboyant store's demise.

After Guldman passed away in 1936, his descendants were only able to keep the store open for about a year before it was forced to shut down. A "going out of business" sale — with characteristically drastic price reductions — drew thousands of last-time customers.

Few Denverites alive today remember the Golden Eagle at all.

Its vestiges can only be found in antique shops or historical books and websites, giving grim testimony to the "here today, gone tomorrow" nature of human memory.

But much of what Guldman accomplished philanthropically remains in place in modern Denver, some of it under different names and identities.

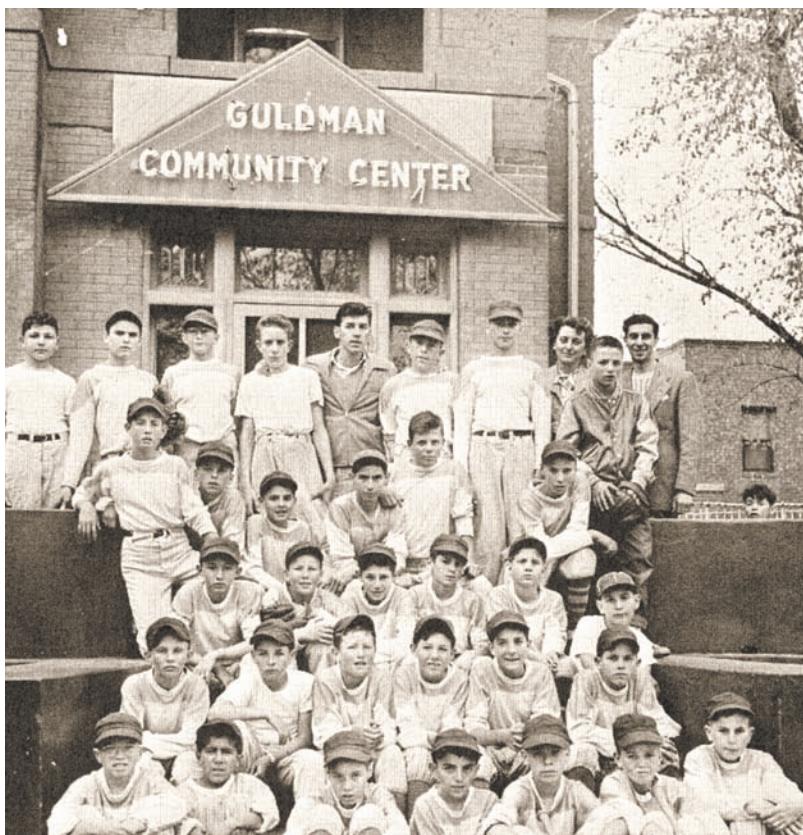
His Guldman JCC on the West Side — a place that offered aid and recreation to thousands of Jewish immigrants — is long gone, but today's thriving JCC is a direct descendant of the institution that he founded.

The same for Beth Israel, which would not have opened in 1920 without Guldman's help, and which lives on today in the form of Shalom Park.

Not only did Guldman provide much of the initial funding for the JCRS on the West Side, but he was a major contributor to another institution devoted to helping tuberculosis patients, National Jewish Hospital on the East Side. When it opened in 1899, its beds were covered with blankets donated from the Golden Eagle. National Jewish today remains one of Denver and the nation's most respected medical institutions.

Two synagogues that remain vital parts of the modern Denver Jewish community — Temple Emanuel and BMH (now BMH-BJ) — owe much of their early survival to Guldman's sustained largesse. He was a member of both congregations for decades.

Many other causes, both Jewish and general, benefitted from Guldman's generosity. In those less formal days, people who were dedicated to helping the city's poor often made their way downtown to the Golden Eagle, knowing in advance that Guldman would never let them leave empty-handed.



A boys' baseball team poses in front of the Guldman JCC, named in honor of Louise Guldman, Leopold's daughter. The building stood on ground that roughly corresponds to the present-day recreation center in West Denver's Rude Park.  
DU Beck Archives



A crowd throngs into the Golden Eagle for its final clearance sale in 1937.

DU Beck Archives

**L**earning so much about her great-grandfather during this month's Zoom session, and interacting with other Guldman descendants, "some of whom I never even knew existed," says Rabbi Dayle Friedman, "was stunning. It was so improbable and fascinating and intriguing."

Speaking recently to the **IJN** from Philadelphia, where she works as a Reform-Reconstructionist pulpit rabbi and in providing spiritual care for the aging, Rabbi Friedman says she learned a lot about Guldman.

"I learned that he liked to keep his family close," she says. "He had obligatory Sunday dinners and the family was expected to be there. I think he was quite authoritative."

She also found it fascinating that Guldman's main legacies — business and philanthropy — still figure prominently among his progeny.

"There are threads among his descendants that are pretty strong. Quite a few people are impassioned volunteers and leaders in the nonprofit sector. Quite a few are entrepreneurs. It's interesting how those things reverberate."

But the session also inspired a number of questions about her ancestor, aspects of his life that remain somewhat mysteri-

ous all these years later, she says.

Friedman is naturally curious about Guldman's religious life. She knows that he was raised Orthodox and practiced Reform Judaism but little more than that.

"I would like to know what Judaism meant to him. He was clearly very engaged in the Jewish community, but I don't know what his religious life was like. His father was a kosher butcher and I'm sure he went to services at Temple Emanuel. So what did it mean to him? How did it feel

to come to this place? What role would Judaism play in his life when it wasn't dictated?"

On a broader level, Friedman wonders what was it like to be a man of his time and place.

"I would like to know what it was like to be a 17-year-old leaving home all by yourself," she muses, imagining what she would ask Guldman if she could speak to him across time.

"And then you went from Watertown, Wisconsin to Leadville, Colorado. I mean, Leadville was a pretty rough place in those days! Were you scared? Were you excited?"

As denizens of the radically different world of the 21st century, we can only imagine.

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