

American Balkans: Olmsted Trips Over Amish Country

By David N. Brown

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In researching previous debunkings of Olmsted's stories about the supposed absence of autism among the Amish, I have seen prominent speculation on whether he even visited the Amish. My own appraisal is that most of his sources were alternative medicine sources with an obvious interest in promoting a link between vaccines and autism. (See "The 'Amish Anomaly' Hoax".) But he appears to have had one contact among the Amish, a woman named Stacy-Jean Inion. This article will be partly about her, and partly about a broader story, about the minorities of the northeast coastal states, and about how ignorant people can be even of their own neighbors.

Shqiptars, Pineys and others

In thinking over the reliability of reporting, I thought of an experience in researching the Balkans. I have set two novels in the Balkans (see *Walking Dead* and *Aliens V. Exotroopers*) and done a good deal of reading about it. But, I have never been anywhere in Europe, have no family connections to the area (something I have been asked about), and, in all honesty, have read on a "popular" rather than scholarly level. But what I can tell people gets attention. At one point, I tried to add to my information by someone who had spent an extended period working in the Balkans, with the Albanians (who, as I often point out, call themselves Shqiptars). I asked this person if he knew whether the Albanians of Kosovo were of the Tosk or Geg tribe. Not only did he not know, he had never heard of Gegs or Tosks. I have thought about this often, as a sign of lessons to be learned about the difference between being in a place (or reading about it) and truly understanding it. And that is a good starting point for discussing the minorities of the east coast.

From the broadest cultural and historical perspective, the Amish are only one of quite a few isolated communities of the New England states. Other examples are the people(s) of the the Appalachians, and the "Pineys" of the New Jersey Pine Barrens (best known to Fortean and folklorists as home of the Jersey Devil). The history of these peoples illustrate a striking pattern, of prejudice and ludicrous myths about these people groups among their neighbors. The Appalachian "hillbillies", probably most put upon of all, were virtually demonized. H.P. Lovecraft, now notorious for politically incorrect for remarks against non-whites, was in my judgment no less pejorative as he ever was in speaking of a man of the Catskills in "Beyond the Wall of Sleep": "Law and morals are nonexistent, and their general mental status is probably below that of any other section of native American people." Scarcely less purple was the prose professionally published by psychologist Robert Goddard about a Piney family, such as the following notorious passage: "Three children, scantily clad and with shoes that would barely hold together, stood about with drooping jaws and the unmistakable look of the feeble-minded. " (It is amusing to wonder whether the looks on the children's faces had anything to do with the entrance of Goddard's upper field worker!)

In the above-quoted work of Goddard, a study of the alleged affects on heredity of two alleged lineaes dubbed the "Kallikaks", prejudice blatantly spilled over into pseudoscience, and by some appraisals an outright hoax. What I think is an underappreciated aspect of the case is that Goddard was probably "guided" by local folklore accepted too much at face value. The central "fact" behind the study was that an 18th-century gentleman named Martin sired both lineages, one by his upstanding Quaker wife and the other, dubbed "kakos", by a "feeble-minded" woman (given the consistent moralizing tone of

Goddard's writing, it is no stretch to insert “prostitute”). This narrative reads very much like a folk tale, quite possibly modeled on the Biblical narrative of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Even if it were reasonably well-grounded in historical fact, it is doubtful whether Goddard was successful in tracing the lineages, especially the latter “kakos” line, accurately or completely. (The following passage should raise particular doubts: “Our field worker occasionally found herself in the midst of a good family of the same name, which apparently was in no way related to the girl whose ancestry we were investigating. In such cases, there was nothing to be done but to beat a retreat and start again in another direction.” Hard not to suspect that the field worker simply refused to believe there were “good” families in the kakos line!) It appears that Goddard got much of his data from the Pineys' oral accounts, an especially pointed irony given his appraisal of the same people as “feeble-minded”.

It can thus be said with great confidence that the ability of outsiders, even geographic neighbors, to obtain accurate information about a small and isolated is highly suspect, and probably more so for the Amish than for many. (By comparison, the “pineys” don't appear to have presented any barriers to the introduction of modern society beyond what poverty forced upon them.) Such a population's own reports, when misinterpreted, uncritically accepted and/or circulated out of context, may only exacerbate the problem of misunderstandings. Any attempt at serious research on the Amish should have been conducted by someone with both ample experience dealing with them and a good grasp of sociology. Olmsted, not even a particularly experienced journalist (see “Profile of Fraud”), probably never had a chance of gaining useful, first-hand insights into the Amish population. As it happens, it is quite possible that he didn't even attempt to do so.

Olmsted's “Amish” informant

If what Olmsted reported is to be taken at face value, exactly one Amish source was interviewed, a woman named Stacy-Jean Inion. (I consider it open to question whether Olmsted himself conducted the interview. It may instead have been done by Kyle Pearson, credited for unspecified assistance.) But, it is open to question whether Inion was an unprejudiced source, or even technically “Amish”.

A significant “background” issue is the well-known relationship of the Amish with the Mennonites. The “real” Amish, in their own terms the Old Order, are a conservative sister group to the Mennonites. By reputation, their relationship is like that of the Serbs and Bosnians: Closely related, but estranged at best and mutually hostile at worst. (Except, of course, that as pacifists the Mennonites and Amish haven't gone so far as to kill each other.) However, Olmsted goes to significant lengths to minimize this division, including a reference to the “Amish-Mennonite religion”. He also presents the Amish as hospitable to outsiders, quite possibly to downplay the difficulty of learning about them. Dick Warner (“A Glimpse of the Amish”, June 2) is quoted as saying, “They invite me to sleep in their homes. They feed me. I pray with them.” One does not have to doubt Warner's honesty to take his account with a grain of salt. 19th-century accounts from travelers in Albania describe with equal vividness the hospitality they were showed by the Shqiptars and the worst of the Shqiptars' notorious feuds with each other. The likely lesson is that, in traditional societies, strangers arouse less hostility than neighbors.

One of the ways Olmsted's problematic treatment of the Amish-Mennonite divide came to my attention was in investigating the background of Frank C. Noonan, supposedly doctor to “thousands” of Amish children. Ephrata has a well-documented *Mennonite* community, but I could find no reference to an Amish population, unless one counts the Peaceful Valley Amish Furniture store. By all indications, the Amish population is concentrated south and east, closer to Strasburg and Lancaster itself (both filming locations for *Witness*). Thus, I quickly concluded that it was unlikely that Noonan had treated so many Amish at his present location (though on further reading it became clear that neither he nor Olmsted were making that claim).

Where this made me skeptical, I was absolutely incredulous at Olmsted's introduction of Stacy-Jean Inion as an "Amish-Mennonite" woman. The most problematic aspect of the article is that Stacy-Jean Inion is identified as "Amish Mennonite", with no explanation what the phrase is intended to mean. Such an explanation is certainly needed. As a matter of general understanding, Amish and Mennonites are like the Serbs and the Bosnians: of common origin, but long estranged and sometimes mutually hostile. After a good deal of reading, I have arrived at a probable explanation: To the extent that "Amish Mennonite" has any current meaning, it refers to groups such as the Beachy Amish, who split from the Old Order in 1927. I would guess that the Inions are, simply, "Beachies", who do have a well-documented presence in Pennsylvania. Given this understanding, Olmsted's clear intention to treat her as at least a valid source about the "real" (ie Old Order) Amish can be rejected at face value. For all *practical* purposes, the "Amish Mennonites" are a population unto themselves. As an anonymous wiki contributor has put it, "Beachys are neither Amish nor Mennonite." They are, to amend my Balkan analogy, equivalent to Bosnians where the Old Order would be Serbs and the Mennonites Croatia. It would be unsurprising if the Old Order proved to go to greater lengths to shun the "Beachys" than they do mainstream society. It is commonplace for the arguable "heretic" to be deemed worse than a mere unbeliever. Therefore, Inion was neither representative of nor a demonstrably reliable source about the "real" (Old Order) Amish community.

In describing the interview, Olmsted pointedly comments, "It also was surprising that Stacey-jean launched unbidden into vaccines". He clearly wishes to convey the impression that this was approximately a chance encounter with a typical member of the Amish community. There is ample evidence of a different story. By his own admission, they were introduced to each other by Mary Megson, who (as he fails to mention) is an open vaccine critic. Even more importantly, Inion's own words leave no doubt that she already had a very definite opinion on vaccines. "(S)o far we've never met a family that lives a healthy lifestyle and does not vaccinate their children that has an autistic child." This all but defines vaccination as *unhealthy*, and implies autism as a symptom of bad choices. Hence, by all indications the interview amounts to one with a biased source to which Olmsted was directed by another biased source.

The core of Inion's report is the following narrative: "One of them, we're very certain it was a vaccine reaction, even though the government would not agree with that... (T)heir daughter had a vaccine reaction and is now autistic. She was walking and functioning and a happy bright child, and 24 hours after she had her vaccine, her legs went limp and she had a typical high-pitched scream. They called the doctor and the doctor said it was fine -- a lot of high-pitched screaming goes along with it. She completely quit speaking. She completely quit making eye contact with people. She went in her own world. This happened something like 15 months."

By any critical appraisal, this proves nothing of importance even when taken at face value. Any number of comparable claims of autism following vaccination have been reported outside the Amish community, without satisfying professional standards of scientific proof of causation. Particularly unhelpful in its typicality is the report that both vaccination and the onset of autism occurred at 15 months. If vaccination had been performed when the child was older, as would seem a strong possibility for an isolated population, and the onset of autism had also occurred later than in the general population, then it would be a very important datum. Instead, we are left with one more anecdote presenting nothing more or less than a synchronicity of events. Of course, no one is obliged to accept even Inion's account of the facts. It is clearly wanting in detail. Which vaccine was given? Is the child from the Leola area, or from elsewhere in Lancaster County? (Leola is one of three towns with a combined population of 6,625 as of 2000, of which probably no more than 35% (official statistic for

those of German descent) are of Amish or Mennonite background.) How does Inion know of the family and their (alleged) story? The last question may be regarded as most significant, because if Inion did not have direct contact with the family, then we are dealing with a report of the notorious “friend of a friend” variety!

Inion is also quoted as making the following noteworthy comments: “The younger Amish more and more are getting vaccines. It's a minority of children who vaccinate (*sic*), but that is changing now... (Autism) is so much more rare among our people... We haven't come across one yet .Everywhere I go (outside the Amish community) I find children who are autistic, just because I have an autistic daughter -- in the grocery store, in the park, wherever I go. In the Amish community, I simply don't find that.”

To those with a canny eye for subtexts and social conflict, this is not only of doubtful validity but advertises the possibility of unspoken bias and prejudice. The statements that autistics are “rare among our people” but “everywhere” outside define autism as a negative quality of outsiders. This could obviously lead to selective perception, in which the outsiders might be wrongly regarded as different simply because they are subjected to greater scrutiny. It could also be used as a subtext for judgments on members of one's own community. Her comments about vaccination among the Amish indicate a division over vaccines within the “Amish” community, at least in part along generational lines. The Inions, paradoxically but not unusually for recent converts, have clearly aligned themselves with the conservative side. Such actions may serve as (over)compensation for a newcomers' insecurities: By siding with tradition, and demeaning seemingly established “believers”, their own status is enhanced (a standard interpretation of *conversos* who joined the Spanish Inquisition).

But, we can say this much in Inion's defense: She was much better at detecting and reporting autism than local doctor Olmsted consulted, Frank Noonan. He claimed to have treated thousands of Amish children in Lancaster County without seeing even one autistic. (In fairness, one quote qualifies this: “I may be able to think in all those years of maybe one case of (Amish) autism I've had.”) In contrast, Inion informed Olmsted of two autistic Amish and/or Mennonite children, from a probable sample of *under 2,300* if they were residents of her immediate community. This would have been more than sufficient warning to Olmsted that what Noonan reported (or rather *didn't* report) was preposterous. (A indication was when Lawrence Leichtman, a doctor practicing in Virginia, told Olmsted that he was treating an autistic child from Lancaster County.) Despite this warning, he used Noonan as a source for a May 10 article, effectively favoring a doctor with no apparent qualifications to diagnose or treat autism over the mother of an autistic child.

In one notable moment of reflection, Dan Olmsted makes the following comment: “Still, I could be trapped in a feedback loop: The Amish I am likeliest to know about -- because they have the most contact with the outside world-- also are likeliest to adopt a special-needs child such as Julia from outside the community, and likeliest to have their children vaccinated. “ This can be considered an admission by Olmsted that his research was *not* of anything like a representative cross-section of the Amish population. He further betrays himself by indicating but failing to acknowledge the obvious: *The Amish he did not contact would also be most likely to have children with **undiagnosed** autism.* There are further problems. those he did contact are those most likely to have heard of the “vaccine-caused autism” allegation, and possibly perceived “evidence” of it by suggestion alone. Finally, by his account, the Amish whom he contacted reported a low autism rate despite being the most likely in their community to be vaccinated. Once again, it is proved that Olmsted refused to acknowledge the implications of whatever research he actually conducted.

Coda: How many autistic Amish are there?

Even with the overwhelming evidence of Olmsted's flawed research and general lack of credibility, it is likely that his claim of lowered autism among the Amish will not die until there are, at a minimum, credible estimates of the actual rate of autism in Amish communities. Until then, some will continue to question rhetorically, "Where are the autistic Amish?" This is the line taken by Olmsted himself, who most recently stated that the Amish have an autism rate of 1/10,000, compared to ca. 1/100 for the general population.

The problem is, Olmsted himself directly refuted this defense as of May 20, 2005. On that date, he reported learning of six autistic children from Dr. Leichtman of Virginia Beach, VA. That *none* had been vaccinated was only a part of the problem. The fact that his numbers did not fit with those of Olmsted's other sources (particularly Heng Wang, who reported only one autistic among his own Ohio Amish patients where Leichtman reported two) made matters considerably worse. But perhaps worst of all was that the last of the six was from Texas. The reported [Amish population of Texas](#) was 135 in 2007, which would technically give that Amish subpopulation an autism rate of 0.7%- more than the 1/166 rate estimate current in 2005, and in line with the +1% figures gaining support today. This should have been the final warning that claims of autism being absent from Amish populations of over 10,000 were false beyond reasonable doubt, and that it is quite possible that the Amish have an approximately normal autism rate. If Olmsted failed to realize this, it was because he was too biased, too inexperienced or simply too lazy to question the "story" that his "sources" were offering him.

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