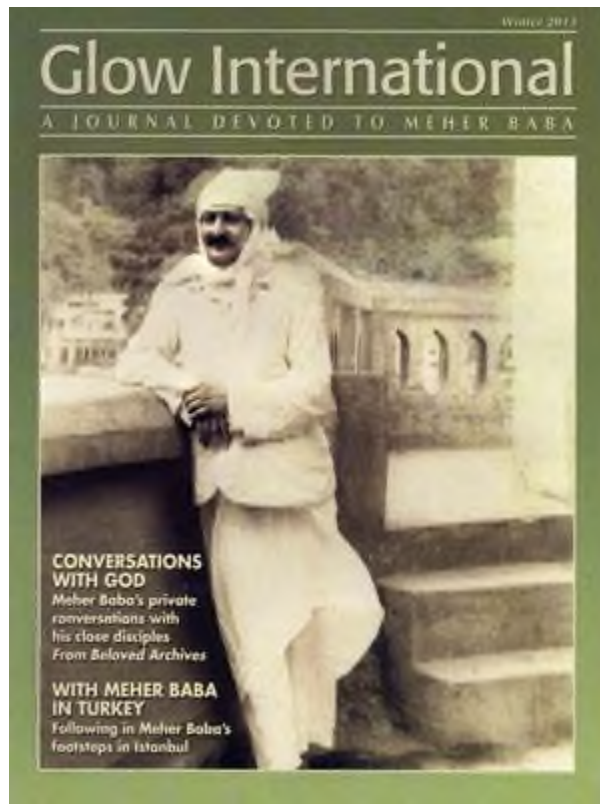


Rev. Joseph Nathan Oldenburg
Meher Baba's First American Devotee

An article by Randy Wasserstrom
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Randy says:

The idea for this article came from *Lord Meher*, p. 758 (online rev. ed.):

"On Saturday, January 1, 1927, Baba received many New Year's cards, including one from an American in Cripple Creek, Colorado, named Joseph Nathan Oldenburg. Born in Galena, Illinois, Oldenburg, 54, was of Irish/German descent and was a pastor of a Catholic Church in Cripple Creek. He wrote several letters to Baba from 1928-1931, although there is no record as to how he learned of him. Oldenburg may have been one of the first contacts from America."

Rev. Joseph Nathan Oldenburg: Meher Baba's First American Devotee

Randy Wasserstrom, after extensive research through old diaries and letters, writes about Meher Baba's first American devotee, Rev. Joseph Nathan Oldenburg

About 1924, Joseph Nathan Oldenburg, 52, a Roman Catholic priest (originally from Illinois) living in Colorado, heard about Avatar Meher Baba and began corresponding with him. Although it is unknown how he heard about Baba, it is presumed that he heard Baba's name from Rustom Driver (Naorooz N. Rustam, 1897-1989), the brother of Baba's close disciple and *mandali*, Padri (Fareedoon Driver). Rustom was encouraged by Baba to go to America. He arrived there in 1920 and went to Colorado in the early 1920's and, hence, the possibility he was Joseph's contact. It seems that Joseph was the first American to have had significant contact with Meher Baba. His contact preceded Baba's visit to America by at least five years.



Padri, Meher Baba's close disciple, at Meherabad. From Beloved Archives Image Collection

Background of the Contact: Rustom Driver (called Naorooz Rustam in America) was born July 2, 1897 in Yezd, Iran, the first of the four sons of Naorooz and Freiny Driver. At a young age, he traveled via camel caravan with 400 other young people to emigrate from Iran to India. The journey took several weeks and ended in Bombay; his maternal grandparents had already settled in Poona and had a hotel called the Royal Hotel. (Source: Peter Nordeen). He was educated in British schools in Bombay and in Poona. In World War I, he served with the British army in the campaign against the Turks.

Rustom, as mentioned, was the brother of Padri and the son of Freiny Masi who was a close devotee of Hazrat Babajan in Poona. She had been close to Babajan since the family's arrival in Poona about 1905 and both of her sons had met her. Eventually through Babajan, she also met Meher Baba and he introduced Naorooz, then Rustam to Baba. Rustam arrived in America on his 23rd birthday in 1920, hoping to get into films. At this time, he renamed himself Naorooz N. Rustam. His dream was derailed by practical considerations, and he initially worked as a subway conductor in New York City. Then he applied to the Colorado School of Mines, an engineering school in Golden, Colorado, and was accepted. He moved to Golden in the early 1920's when the contact with Rev. Oldenburg was made.

His younger brother, Fareedoon, a close friend of Baba's brother Jal, heard about Baba through Jal who "quite often tried to persuade him to visit his brother, but Fareedoon had no intention of meeting a guru." Freiny regularly visited Baba and tried to coax her son into joining her, but he stubbornly refused. In February 1922, after Freiny had returned from seeing Meher Baba, she asked him, "Tomorrow, will you go and ask Meher Baba what time I should come for his *darshan*?" Not wishing

to displease his mother, Fareedoon obeyed and the next day went to meet Baba, accompanied by Jal. (*Lord Meher*)

Upon arriving at the thatched hut, Fareedoon introduced himself and delivered his mother's request. Seemingly surprised, Baba replied, "Your mother was here yesterday. Why does she want to come today?" Fareedoon was taken aback to learn this, but was hesitant to leave. Struck by Meher Baba's personality, he was secretly hoping the Master would tell him to stay longer. Reading his thoughts, Baba told him, "If you like, you may sit here for a while." Eighteen-year-old Fareedoon happily sat down. The evening meal arrived and the Master distributed part of it to those present. Fareedoon also partook of the *prasad* and then Baba told him to leave. Fareedoon rose with a heavy heart, for he was genuinely drawn to Meher Baba. As he was departing, the Master told him, "Come whenever you can. My door is always open to you." From that day on, Fareedoon began going to the hut in the evenings after working at his job in an automobile garage, and during that period became intensely devoted to Meher Baba.

Fareedoon then joined Baba's early disciples, called *mandali*, at Manzil-e-Meem. He was nicknamed Padri by Meher Baba and the new name stuck as his permanent nomenclature. His meeting Meher Baba closely corresponded with Joseph Oldenburg's contact with Fareedoon's older brother in Colorado.

It seems that Baba needed an early American contact, and through Naorooz, he accomplished his work.

After graduation from the Colorado School of Mines, Naorooz moved to Glen Ferris, West Virginia in 1927 to become a geological engineer for the U.S. government (U.S. Naturalization Record, 1929). He was 30 years old. He married 20-year-old Gladys Daugherty, in 1930 in West Virginia, and under the influence of his wife, he

converted to Christianity. The couple's first child, Frederick, was born July 4, 1934 in West Virginia. Their second child, Nancy, was born in January 1939.

According to his son Frederick, his father never mentioned Meher Baba, his spiritual past or Joseph Oldenburg. He said he viewed himself as a secular, modern person. Evidently, his earlier passion for Baba had cooled, but he had accomplished the mission that Baba had set out for him – to make contact with Joseph Oldenburg, who then reached out to Meher Baba in India. Naorooz died in 1989 in Searcy, Arkansas.

Joseph Oldenburg Continued: Joseph Nathan Oldenburg was born September 12, 1872 in Galena, Illinois, the fourth child of Fred and Rosana Oldenburg (1880 U.S. Census). His father, a farmer, was born in Germany and had emigrated to America in 1854, while his mother was born in Ireland and emigrated to America by 1860. The family was Catholic and apparently attended St. Michael's Church, founded in 1831.

Joseph must have had a spiritual inclination from an early age as he served as a monk in a Catholic Monastery by age 27. He had contracted tuberculosis and went to a special monastery for tubercular monks, St. Juliana's in Delta, Colorado. He was one of just three monks at St. Juliana's and did recover from the disease. One can speculate that this experience reinforced his faith in God.

After leaving St. Juliana's, Joseph began his studies to become a Catholic priest. (This was during the period when Merwan Irani, later to be Meher Baba, was pursuing his elementary and grammar school studies in Poona, India). He made his classical studies at Cape Girardeau, Missouri and at the Servite seminary in Chicago. He studied philosophy at St. Vincent's seminary in Cape Girardeau and theology at St. Thomas' seminary, Denver. He was ordained June 11, 1910 by Bishop Muldoon of Rockford, Illinois, for the Diocese of Denver. (Obit, Archdiocese of Denver, 1949).

When Joseph became a priest, he was 37 years old and affiliated with the Archdiocese of Denver, Colorado. His first assignment was as an assistant priest at Annunciation parish in Denver and then this assignment was followed by many temporary and/or short-term assignments in Colorado in small cities such as Sterling,



Naorooz Rustam in 1935 in West Virginia. He was probably Oldenburg's Baba contact. Photo by Frederick Rustam.

Fruita and Holyoke.

In 1920, two years before Meher Baba began his Ministry, Joseph was in Akron, Colorado, on the other side of the state from Delta. Now age 47, he was serving as priest in that small community of about 2000 people. (1920 U.S. Census). Also in 1920, Joseph moved to Holyoke, Colorado in the northeast corner of the state and began a five-year term as Pastor of St. Patrick's Church at 309 E. Furry Street. (Colorado Catholicism, The Archdiocese of Denver "St Patrick's 1893", by Thomas J. Noel)

This period, just before Baba began his silence, was the probable time that Joseph heard about Meher Baba from Naorooz Rustam. We can assume it was a chance meeting, but preordained! Joseph then began a correspondence with Baba that lasted at least six years. As the following letters indicate, he was in love with Baba, while maintaining his duties as a Roman Catholic priest.

Joseph received a letter from Baba that was sent on October 1, 1926. In this letter, Baba drew Joseph closer to him by asking him to be his student. (referenced in Joseph's letter to Baba, 12-27-1929)

He also sent a New Year's card to Baba in 1927, received by Baba in January, 1927 (Lord Meher).

The following are letters sent from Colorado by Rev. Oldenburg to Baba (Courtesy: Avatar Meher Baba Trust):

*Telluride, Colorado
U.S.A.
Dec. 28, 1928*

My dearest, beloved and most respected Guruji and Divine Father Santguru Meher Baba:

First of all, I lay my head on thy Divine Feet for they Derson (Darshan) and Blessing, my beloved Divine Bawaji and Divine Guruji Almighty.

I write this letter to your goodself for to let your goodself know that often do I think of your goodself both day and night, thoughts go out to your goodself.

I have been expecting to receive a letter from your goodself, but none came. I always look forward to receiving a letter from your goodself. I hear the raps frequently. I also hear something like a voice trying to speak to me.

If there is anything I can do in order to assist or help me to unfold God consciousness, please let know.

My Divine Guruji, your goodself knows that I wish your goodself all joy, happiness and success for the New Year.

Now I retire from your goodself with my head on your Divine Feet for they Derson and Blessings. Please accept my mightiest worshipping love from me for your goodself.

*I am as ever,
Your most humble Disciple
Joseph N. Oldenburg*

This letter was written when Rev. Oldenburg was the pastor at St. Patrick's Church in Telluride. The congregation, however, went defunct just five months later when The Smuggler, the mine which supported the town for 45 years, went out of business. Joseph was then transferred to the Queen of All Saints Parish in Crested Butte, a town 160 miles southwest of Telluride.

*Dec. 27, 1929
Joseph N. Oldenburg
Crested Butte, CO.*

My dearest, beloved and most Respected Guruji and Divine Father Shree Santguru Meher Baba:

First of all, I lay my head on thy Divine



Joseph must have had a spiritual inclination from a young age as he became a monk in a Catholic monastery by age 27. In 1900, when Merwan Irani (Meher Baba) was six years old, Joseph was a monk at St. Juliana's Monastery in Delta, Colorado (1900 US Census), a city of about 8000 persons, located in western Colorado near the Utah border. St. Julian's was of the Servite Order and was established to aid the recovery of monks with tuberculosis. Joseph did recover and apparently returned to Illinois where he pursued studies for becoming a priest.

Feet for thy Derson and Blessings, my beloved Bawaji and Divine Guruji Almighty.

I write this letter to your goodself for only to let your goodself know that the other day I received your looked for and very welcome letter of Nov. 21, 1929. It gave me much pleasure.

I use the ash according to the instructions of your goodself. The Doctor tells me there is quite a bit of pus in my urine, coming from the Prostrate Gland and the bladder. The Doctors advised me to undergo an operation, I do not wish to do so. Please let me know if I should or should not have the operation! Please help me and cure me of this ailment or inflammation my beloved Divine Guruji, Shree Santguru Meher Baba. I feel that your goodself can cure me. If your goodself wishes me to go on any diet please let me know and I will carry out your goodself's instruction in as far as I can possibly do so.

This letter shows the intimate relationship Joseph had with Meher Baba, as he was able to ask the Master about the specifics of his health and whether or not to get an operation.

In 1930, Joseph was transferred again to yet another church, St. Joseph's, in Holly, Colorado. He remained at that congregation until the Fall of 1932. On April 29, 1931 Joseph wrote another letter to Baba:

*Joseph N. Oldenburg
Holly, Colorado
U.S.A.*

April 29, 1931

My Dearest Beloved and most Respected Guruji and Divine Father Shree Santguru Meher Baba:

First of all, I lay my head on thy Divine Feet for thy Derson and Blessing, my Beloved Divine Bawaji and Divine Guruji Almighty.

I write this letter to your goodself for to let your goodself know that I have been thinking of your goodself very often and I felt the desire to write to your goodself so I am following this inspiration or desire to write to your goodself.

I think of your goodself, my Divine Father, every day and I beg of you, my beloved Guruji to assist and help me in every way possible to reach God

Consciousness and self realization and freedom. Please assist me, I desire and wish to become good and holy in every respect and in every way.

At times I hear something in my ear as if something was trying to speak to me.

If there are any instructions which your goodself wishes to give me, please do so and I will carry the instructions out as perfect as I can possibly do so.

My beloved and respected Guruji, if it would not be asking too much your goodself, please drop me a line. I know your goodself is kept very busy and do not have much time to write.

Now I retire from your goodself and with my head on they Divine Feet for thy Derson and Blessing. Please accept my mightiest worshipping love and kisses from me for your goodself. I am as ever,

*Your most humble Disciple.
Joseph N. Oldenburg*

This letter was written just five months before Meher Baba's first arrival in the United States on November 6, 1931. One must wonder if Joseph knew about Baba's arrival and if he wanted to meet him? It is possible he did meet him during that time, but there is no mention of this meeting in any of the diaries or archives.

When Baba returned to America in May 1932, he traveled by train across the country from New York City to Los Angeles, California. On this trip, He stopped in Kansas City, Missouri, 400 miles from where Joseph lived in Holly, CO. Baba then spent one week in Hollywood, CA, May 31 to June 7, 1932. Again, one must wonder if Joseph knew Baba was in Hollywood and whether he desired to meet him there?

Joseph retired from the priesthood in late 1932 and returned to his hometown of Galena, Illinois. In May 1934, he embarked on a journey to Sydney, Australia, starting in San Francisco and stopping in Honolulu, Hawaii on the way (Ancestry.com) Meher Baba also traveled by ship on the same route just 8 months later in January 1935. This does not appear to be a coincidence.

When Joseph was coming from Sydney to London in June-July 1935, he stopped in Bombay (Ancestry.com). Baba was in India at the time, but not in Bombay, so it does appear he and Joseph met at that time. Nevertheless, the proximity occurred, perhaps to reinforce Baba's connection to Joseph.

From
Joseph N. Oldenburg
Holyoke, Colorado
U.S.A.
April 20 - 1931

W

My dearest beloved and most respected
Guruji and Divine Father Shree Santivan
Meher Baba:-

First of all I beg leave on thy name that
for thy reason and blessing my beloved Divine Guruji
and Divine Guruji always.

I write this letter to your goodness for I believe
your goodness know that I have been thinking of your
goodness very often and I felt the desire to write
to you goodness as I am following the inspiration
to write to you goodness.

I think of your goodness, my Divine Father very
day and I beg of you, my beloved Guruji to assist
and help me in any way possible to reach God
consciousness and self realization and freedom.
Please assist me, I desire and wish to become
good and holy in every respect and in every way
at times I have sometimes at my own mind if I had
something was trying to speak to me.

If there are any instructions what your goodness
wish to give me please do so and I will carry

the instructions out as far and as perfect as I
can possibly do.

My beloved and respected Guruji if it would not
be asking to much of your goodness please do not
a hour. I know your goodness is kept very busy
and do not have much time to write.

Now I retire from your goodness with my head
on thy hand that for thy reason and blessing.
Please accept my mightiest reverencing love and
devotion from me for your goodness. I am as ever
Your most humble disciple
Joseph N. Oldenburg.

Letter by Joseph Oldenburg to Meher Baba on April 20, 1931. Courtesy: Avatar Meher Baba Trust

Joseph stayed in England and Ireland until September 1935, when he returned to the USA and settled again in his hometown of Galena, Illinois. It is unknown whether he maintained his earlier passionate devotion to Baba, but it is entirely possible that he did so.

He lived in Galena and in Dubuque, Iowa until his death in May 1949 at age 77. He was buried in the Catholic cemetery in Galena.

Joseph Oldenburg was quite possibly the first American Baba lover. His connection to Baba through Rustam Driver catalyzed a passionate divine love affair that inspires us to this day. ◆

A response from Frederick Rustam about his father Naarooz.

Mr. Wasserstrom,

I apologize for the delay in replying to your letter of April 28.

My father, Naarooz Rustam was sensitive to being viewed as an exotic foreigner. He rarely spoke of his history.

I do know that he entered the U.S. in 1919. After an unknown amount of time in New York City, he moved to Colorado to study mining and civil engineering at the Colorado School of Mines.

My father converted to Protestant Christianity when he married my mother in 1938. He never spoke of his spiritual past. He never mentioned Meher Baba or Jos. Nathan Oldenburg.

Sincerely,
Frederick Rustam
Washington, D.C.

Received
5-11-2013

probably
~1923