



How a Transylvanian Mystic Made Sprouted-Grain Bread a Californian Ritual

Edmond Szekely claimed he found a divine bread recipe in a lost scroll from an ancient sect and preached it far and wide. But was his story true?

JK By [Jonathan Kauffman](#)

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In 1923, the prefect of the Vatican library unlocked a door in the Archivio Segreto and directed 18-year-old Edmond Bordeaux Szekely down the stairs to a room blanketed in

dust. The Transylvanian student, already fluent in Latin and ancient Greek, had come to Rome with a letter of introduction from his secondary-school headmaster, planning to study the works of St. Francis of Assisi. But Monseigneur Angelo Mercati encouraged Szekeley to delve deeper and seek out the source of the saint's sacred bond with God and nature. Sifting through manuscripts in the archives' most hidden of secret chambers, the teenager discovered fragments of a scroll written in Aramaic by the Essenes, a mystical sect that had lived in the Israeli desert millennia before—an Essene gospel too heretical for the Catholic church to acknowledge yet too holy for Szekeley to keep from the world.

Or so Szekeley would recount in his memoirs 60 years later, when no one was left to contradict him.

Rancho La Puerta, the health resort Szekeley founded in Mexico during the early years of World War II, is still thriving. The *Essene Gospel of Peace* he translated into English in the 1930s may not have had much of an impact on mainstream Christianity, but Szekeley's health-food teachings, based on its passages, are echoed in the wellness trends of today: raw fruits and vegetables, juices, yogurt, whole grains, and legumes.

The Essene Gospel lives on in what came to be known as Essene bread—Ezekiel 4:9 sprouted-grain bread, the most famous version, is now found in every natural-food store in the United States. The bread toasts up like slices from a commercial whole-wheat loaf, but it's made with mashed, sprouted grains, and legumes instead of milled flour. Food of Life, the Southern California bakery that produces Ezekiel 4:9, doesn't acknowledge its origins. In fact, if you read the Bible verse on its package (“Take also unto thee WHEAT, and BARLEY, and BEANS, and LENTILS, and MILLET, and SPELT”), you might assume the recipe is based on the Hebrew scriptures.

But the Essene Gospel diverges from the canonical scriptures in some eyebrow-raising ways.



EDMOND SZEKELY, COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Seventeen years after Szekely left the Vatican, he and his wife, Deborah, opened a resort named Rancho La Puerta in an oak-lined valley just outside Tecate, Mexico, surrounded by wheat fields, wild beehives, and grapevines. There they lived like the Essenes.

In the early days of the resort, guests would begin each day by crawling out of their tents to hike up nearby Mount Kuchumaa and greet the morning sun. They would spend their mornings doing breathing exercises, flinging their arms wide open to gulp down air, and exposing their bodies to the elemental energies swimming in a cold stream and sunbathing in shallow, coffin-shaped stone “Sumerian baths.”

If they weren’t on a detoxifying all-grape diet, the guests might revive their energy at lunch with fresh fruits and vegetables, perhaps a little sour goat milk. Then they could hoe and weed in the organic garden or help build casitas out of surplus military shipping crates—the weekly fee for Rancho La Puerta was \$17.50 plus two and a half hours of labor per day.

The nut-brown, balding Szekely, then in his mid-30s, guided their diets, led their exercises, and gave nightly lectures in French and Esperanto peppered with ancient Greek, Latin, and

Hebrew. He greeted life with tremendous eyebrows and an even more tremendous bonhomie. Many called him “Professor.”

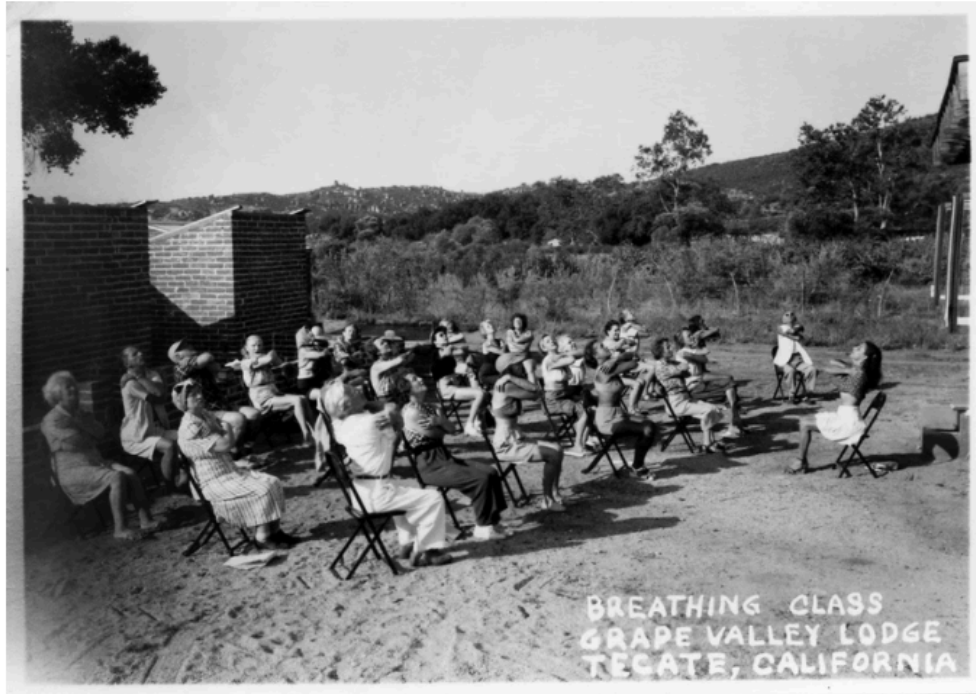
The Professor’s journey from the Vatican to northern Mexico had taken him around the world. After Rome, Szekely had decamped to the University of Paris, where he finished his schooling. From there, he moved to Southern France to join a Zoroastrian commune allied with the German Lebensreform (“life reform”) movement that was giving birth to hiking clubs, nudist beaches, raw-food diets, and water cures across Europe. At age 29, Szekely sailed for Tahiti, where he studied Polynesian traditions and offered natural-health advice to a leper community—plenty of just-picked produce, frequent swims in the tropical seas.

In Tahiti, Szekely encountered two people who would shape his future. The first, a young British aristocrat named Lawrence Purcell Weaver, had been given a terminal diagnosis and was spending his last months on earth exploring the world. The second was Deborah Shainman, Szekely’s future wife—then age 12, the daughter of New York vegetarians escaping the scarcity of the U.S. Depression in search of a healthier diet.

The Shainmans returned to the United States once the economy recovered, while Weaver followed Szekely’s dietary advice and restored his health. He lured Szekely to England that next year, where the two lived on the family estate and co-founded the International Biogenic Society (IBS). With Weaver as his English translator and publisher, Szekely wrote dozens of books on philosophy, healthy living, and what Szekely called “cosmovitalism,” his effort to integrate indigenous mystical traditions with 20th-century science. The IBS also published an English translation of the *Essene Gospel of Peace*.

Through the late 1930s, a small group of bohemian Europeans and North Americans gathered to study with Szekely in England, then the Caribbean, and then Southern California. In California, he eventually reunited with the Shainmans, and 34-year-old Edmond Szekely and 17-year-old Deborah Shainman, round-faced and exuberant, married in 1939. By that time, Transylvania was officially Romanian, and the Romanians had officially sided with the Germans, and so the U.S. declined to renew Szekely’s U.S. visa. Germany had invaded Poland, Great Britain and France had declared war in response, and although Szekely had long obscured his Jewish parentage, Eastern European Jews who could find the means were fleeing to North America. The couple decamped to Mexico, settling just three miles south of the border and one hour east of San Diego.

They didn’t just find shelter from war in Tecate: They built a community around Szekely’s teachings, and invited Californians to study with him.



BREATHING CLASS, COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Cosmovitalism, Szekely's sweeping philosophy, knit together Zoroastrianism, indigenous beliefs from around the world, and ancient Greek philosophy with the atoms, Einsteinian gravity, and radiation of modern-day science.

“Man is a microcosm in the macrocosm,” Szekely (and Weaver) would write in *The Essene Science of Life*, wielding the looping, stentorian prose that midcentury academics were so fond of in their slim, practical guide to living in accordance with the *Essene Gospel of Peace*. “He lives in a field of permanently varying forces; his health is harmony with the surrounding cosmic and natural forces—his disease, physical or mental, is disharmony with them. Cosmotherapy...is at once the most ancient and most modern system of healing, practiced by the greatest Masters of all ages.”

Buddha and Lao-Tsu, according to Szekely, were both masters. So were the Essenes. Flavius Josephus, a Roman scholar writing in the first century CE, first described the Essenes as a Jewish sect who lived in small communal groups, refusing to hold slaves or eat meat and using their skills to heal the sick. “The Essenes of the Dead Sea in Palestine and the Therapeutae of Lake Mareotis in Egypt were the greatest healers of Antiquity,” Szekely added almost 2,000 years later. “They evolved a perfect coordination between all the

material and psychic forces, resulting in a wonderful dynamic synthesis of Health, Healing, and Harmony.”

As far as the world knew, the Essenes left no surviving texts until Szekely discovered one in the Vatican’s secret archives. The Jesus of the Essene tradition, his translation revealed, was little like the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This Jesus preached to his followers about God the Father—but also Earth the Mother and her four elemental helpers: the Angel of Sunshine, the Angel of Water, the Angel of Earth, and the Angel of Air. To follow the gospel faithfully would transform Christianity into nature worship and see physical health as the barometer of holiness.

Along with words of spiritual guidance that seemed to echo the canonical gospels (“Love one another, for God is love, and so shall his angels know that you walk in his paths”), the Messiah advised his followers to eat along the lines of 20th-century Lebensreform—vegetables, whole grains, fresh milk, and honey. In the same Lebensreform spirit, too, Jesus taught his disciples to fast regularly and give themselves enemas, filling a long gourd with water and flushing the hinder parts.

At Rancho La Puerta, where Deborah Szekely was responsible for milking the goats, overseeing the gardens, collecting wild honey, and feeding the guests like the Essenes, she followed the gospel’s recipe to make Essene bread:

Let the angels of God prepare your bread. Moisten your wheat, that the Angel of Water may enter it. Then set it in the air, that the Angel of Air also may embrace it. And leave it from morning to evening beneath the sun, that the Angel of Sunshine may descend upon it. And the blessing of the three angels will soon make the germ of life to sprout in your wheat. Then crush your grain, and make thin wafers, as did your forefathers when they departed out of Egypt, the house of bondage. Put them back again beneath the sun from its appearing, and when it is risen to its highest in the heavens, turn them over on the other side that they be embraced there also by the angel of sunshine, and leave them there until the sun be set.

The Essene Jesus, and his 20th-century translator, believed that plants that had the germ of life in them were the most regenerative source of food. So Deborah would sprout wheatberries, run them through a food mill, and spread the pulp onto strips of sheet metal cut out of 50-gallon drums to bake in the sun. The resulting bread resembled giant, nubbly crackers.

By the time their daughter Sarah Livia Brightwood, who still runs Rancho La Puerta with her 99-year-old mother, was growing up at Rancho La Puerta in the 1960s, the cooks had ditched sun-baked crackers in favor of small “Zarathustran” bread, essentially mounded loaves of sprouted grains. As a child she nicknamed it “Saw Bread.” The insides might be moist and delicious, but, she told me over the phone, “The outside was so hard that you needed a saw to break through it.”



RANCHO LA PUERTA, COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

One problem with the mystical, ancient teachings that lent their spiritual authority to cosmovitalism and Szekely’s dietary advice: Other scholars couldn’t find any trace of them. In the 1970s and 1980s, a Swedish biblical scholar named Per Beskow tried to track down the original Essene texts Szekely translated, and could find no evidence of their existence—a Vatican librarian even told Beskow he couldn’t even find a sign-in sheet bearing Szekely’s name. Monseigneur Mercati, the prefect who had purportedly guided the teenage scholar into the locked room, didn’t become prefect until two years after his supposed visit. This didn’t make a stir: Szekeley, who was already a fringe figure in academic and health circles, had passed away in 1979. The gospel had remained the core text of Szekely’s philosophy, and even after he left Rancho La Puerta for Costa Rica and a new marriage, he continued to “translate” new fragments until his death.

The veracity of the *Essene Gospel* didn't seem to be much of a concern for Szekeley's growing audience in Southern California's health-food circles. Suspicious of academic science, eager to try anything that might make them healthier or more beautiful, they'd already signed up for a wild ride. By the mid-20th century, Los Angeles was home to corrective eating cafeterias, traveling evangelists of exercise and proper digestion, and tiny health food stores that would sell oddities like wheat germ, dessicated liver powder, and alfalfa sprouts. The Szekelys dove into this world, circulating at Los Angeles parties, attracting Californians to Rancho La Puerta for cosmovitalism and health retreats, and opening a glamorous second resort in Escondido called the Golden Door, which in the 1950s and 1960s, was *the* celebrity spa.

Fellow health food gurus, like Paul Bragg (of Bragg's Liquid Aminos), didn't claim spiritual insight, but added half an alphabet's worth of degrees to their names. Were these degrees real? Who was going to demand proof? The proof was the efficacy of their teachings. People who came to Rancho La Puerta in those days studied esoteric philosophy with the charismatic Professor—and felt better after weeks of sunbathing, exercise, and whole-grain, organic, vegetarian food.

Meanwhile, the sworn enemies of the health-food “faddists,” university-trained nutritionists of the same period, were reassuring the public of the benefits of America's newly industrialized food supply. Who was talking about the importance of fiber? Who was encouraging people to cut down on meat and eat more fruits and vegetables? Who was warning about the problems of excess sugars and advocating for farming without pesticides? Not the Harvard professors of the mid-20th-century—health-food prophets like Edmond Bordeaux Szekely.

In the 1960s, hippie spiritual seekers schooled in psychedelics and macrobiotics began circulating the *Essene Gospel of Peace* with the same excitement they did other mystical texts like the Bhagavad Gita and Aleister Crowley's occult prophecies. The gospel was the basis for the menu at The Source, a wildly popular vegetarian restaurant, which was operated by the Source Family, Los Angeles followers of Father Yod who dressed in white robes, recorded psychedelic rock albums, and lived in a giant mansion in the Hollywood Hills.

By the 1970s, longhaired kids working at collectively-run whole-grain bakeries like Wildflower in Ann Arbor, Michigan, followed the *Essene Jesus's* bread recipe to a T, sprouting wheatberries, running them through a meat grinder, and shaping the wet pulp into big domes that they would slowly bake. Forty years later, when I talked to former

Wildflower bakers, they would wistfully describe Essene bread as a lost art. Because they'd essentially malted the grains before baking them, the bread tasted unbelievably sweet, they'd say.

Around the same time, Rancho La Puerta began buying Essene bread from a commercial bakery in Southern California. Sarah Livia Brightwood says she was awed by the fact that it resembled real bread. "I tried it and loved it," she says. "I wish I'd had this as a kid. It was absolutely delicious."

That company was likely Food for Life, which still makes Ezekiel 4:9 Bread. On its website, the company writes that family patriarch Max Torres, after years of working in natural-food stores, founded Food for Life in 1964 in Corona, California, in the same health-food community where Edmond Szekeley was preaching about the Essene diet and sprouted-grain bread. I couldn't find out more; the company curiously didn't return calls from a food writer interested in talking about the company's history. But one point that suggests the origins of the bread were anything but biblical: The Old Testament book of Ezekiel itself. If you read the entirety of Ezekiel, chapter 4, the prophet warns Israelites that the Babylonians are about to conquer Jerusalem, and that they would be forced to survive on bread that was milled from animal feed and baked over burning cakes of their own feces—hardly a divine recipe for sprouted-grain bread. (Somehow the entire passage doesn't fit on the label.) The Ezekiel recipe does, however, align exactly with Jesus's in the *Essene Gospel of Peace*.

The Ezekiel 4:9 bread we find in freezers today is a nutritional relic, divorced from the teachings that created it. But it is hardly alone. We drink Celestial Seasonings herbal teas because a 19th-century vegetarian advocate named Sylvester Graham preached that real tea (meaning leaves from *Camellia sinensis*), as well as sugar and meat, made us weak. We keep Ex-Lax in our cabinets because turn-of-the-20th-century doctors warned that the shit working its way through our intestines caused "auto-intoxication."

Some of these relics—like sprouted grains, which are purportedly easier to digest—have even won the blessing of modern researchers who have replaced the Angels of Air, Water, and Sunshine with phrases like "lower glycemic index" and "increased bioavailability of phytonutrients." Most of us have no idea what those terms actually mean. Yet we put our faith in science, in tiny research studies showing X nutrient raised blood levels of Y, and so the explanation strikes us, intuitively, as true.

For the entirety of human history, good health has been a fragile state, threatened by thousands of dangers we can't predict or control, and pursuing it seems to lead us to some near-delusional treatments like colonic irrigation or ultramarathons. Americans in particular crave strict diets and quick-fix supplements that promise certainty, whether or not we can stick with them for more than a few months. Perhaps it's not so surprising that Edmond Bordeaux Szekely turned to spirituality, intuiting a philosophy so sweeping it could encompass ancient religions and good digestion. If a scholar with good ideas about diet and exercise couldn't convince us to eat better, maybe the universe itself could.

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