

This article appeared in the August 2007 issue of the Straus Historical Society's newsletter.

Debunking "The Story"

Several times a year, usually around the Jewish New Year, Chanukah and at Passover, a story is circulated describing the activities and character of Isidor and of Nathan Straus. The gist of the story is that Isidor was not as philanthropic as Nathan and that somehow, because of this he died in the Titanic disaster while Nathan was saved. Various versions of the story, to a great or lesser extent, describe Isidor's life-style as opulent, his character as mercenary, and his interests decidedly unphilanthropic. Nathan, in contrast, is described as interested in Zionism, the wellbeing of his fellow man, and as one who contributed enormously to great humanitarian goals.

I have carefully written back to the people who sent these stories, trying to show the fallacy of each supposed fact. Here, in this article, I hope to set the record straight. The current story, as it was sent to me, is in italics. My comments follow them in bold type.



Isidor Straus

At the turn of the twentieth century, two of the wealthiest and most famous men in America were a pair of Jewish brothers named Nathan and Isidor Straus. Owners of R.H. Macy's Department Store and founders of the A&S (Abraham & Straus) chain. The brothers were multimillionaires, renowned for their philanthropy and social activism.

Isidor and Nathan, although wealthy and philanthropic, were not two of the wealthiest and most famous men in America. In fact, the family kept a low profile, preferring to socialize with other family members than to attend the large and well-publicized social affairs of the day. The store was founded by Abraham and Wechsler before it became Abraham & Straus. The Strauses bought out Joseph Wechsler to become partners with Abraham Abraham. It did not become a chain until many decades later under the able leadership of Nathan's sons, and others

In 1912, the brothers and their wives were touring Europe,

Isidor and Nathan and their wives were not touring Europe. Isidor and Ida were in Menton and Cap Martin for most of the winter, beginning in January. Isidor was recovering there from an illness. They also visited family in

Germany, went shopping in Paris and stopped in London where Isidor tried to help resolve a coal strike. Nathan and Lina went to Palestine in February with Dr. J. L. Magnes and then he attended the International Tuberculosis Congress in Rome in April. He was a delegate from the United States.

When Nathan, the more ardent Zionist of the two, impulsively said one day, "Hey, why don't we hop over to Palestine?"

And, of course, in those days nobody "hopped" over to Palestine. Nathan and Lina went to Palestine in February, not in January with Isidor and Ida. They did not travel together either onboard a ship or in Europe.

Israel wasn't the tourist hotspot then that it is today. Its population was ravaged by disease, famine, and poverty; but the two had a strong sense of solidarity with their less fortunate brethren,

Nathan was known for his Zionism. Isidor was not. He contributed to the welfare of mankind in many other ways. Their interests and causes were different but both were concerned with the welfare of man.

... and they also wanted to see the health and welfare centers they had endowed with their millions.

It was on their trip in 1912 that Nathan and Lina opened a soup kitchen that provided 300 free meals to the destitute. He also founded the Health Department in Palestine. He did build the Jerusalem Health Center but it did not cost millions. And the health and welfare centers were not built yet. Isidor was not involved in this project.

However, after a week spent touring, Isidor Straus had had enough. "How many camels, hovels, and yeshivas can you see? It's time to go," Isidor decreed with edgy impatience in his voice.

Since they were not there at this time, or together, it is obvious that this conversation could not have taken place.

But Nathan refused to heed his brother's imperious command. It wasn't that he was oblivious to the hardships around him; it was precisely because of them that he wanted to stay. As he absorbed firsthand the vastness of the challenges his fellow Jews were coping with, he felt the burden of responsibility. "We can't leave now," he protested. "Look how much work has to be done here. We have to help. We have the means to help. We can't turn our backs on our people."

"So we'll send more money," his brother snapped back. "I just want to get out of here."

This statement is so out of character for Isidor that it defies comment.

But Nathan felt that money simply wasn't enough. He felt that the Jews who lived under such dire circumstances in Palestine needed the brothers' very presence among them: their initiative, their leadership, and their ideas.

Nathan wanted to help people by giving them access to better health care options and to pasteurized milk. Although he returned to Palestine many times, his contributions enabled others to do the important work he envisioned. He did not feel his presence was important, or required.

Isidor disagreed. The two argued back and forth, and finally Isidor said, "If you insist, stay here. Ida and I are going back to America. . . where we belong."

Isidor and Ida felt very much at home in Europe and could not have suggested that America was "where they belonged." Their roots, and much of their family, were in Germany, the place where they were both born and returned often. In the many hundreds of letters in the Society's archives there is no evidence of an argument between Isidor and Nathan, ever, for any reason. They were devoted brothers who were respectful of their differences and supportive of each other.

The two separated. Isidor and his wife returned to Europe, while Nathan and his spouse stayed in Palestine, traveling the country and contributing huge sums of money to the establishment of education, health, and social welfare programs to benefit the needy.

Since the two couples were not together, they could not have separated. Nathan never threw huge sums of money around as this statement implies.

Nathan also financed the creation of a brand-new city on the shores of the Mediterranean. And since his name in Hebrew was Natan, and he was the city's chief donor, the founders named it after him and called it...Natanya.

Natanya was named for Nathan Straus in the hope that he would be so flattered that he would contribute huge sums of money to it. He did not finance its creation. He told them he had already given away 3/4's of his fortune and had no more to give. The mayor of Natanya was later sent to New York to encourage Nathan to contribute to them. He returned home empty handed. But the city already bore the name of this great philanthropist and still does today.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, Isidor Straus was preparing to sail home to America aboard an ocean liner for which he had also made reservations for his brother, Nathan, and his wife.

There were never reservations for Nathan and Lina nor was there any expectation that they would accompany Isidor and Ida home.

"You must leave Palestine NOW!" he cabled his brother in an urgent telegram. "I have made reservations for you and if you don't get here soon, you'll miss the boat."

There was no such telegram.

But Nathan delayed. There was so much work to be done that he waited until the last possible moment to make the connection. By the time he reached London, it was April 12 and the liner had already left port in Southampton with Isidor and Ida Straus aboard.

Nathan and Lina went from Palestine to Rome where they attended the International Tuberculosis Congress. He was a representative of the United States. They were there on April 12th. They'd planned to be there. There was never an expectation that they would be in London or traveling aboard Titanic.



Nathan Straus

Nathan felt disconsolate that he had, as his brother had warned, "missed the boat." For this was no ordinary expedition, no common, everyday cruise that he had forfeited, but the much ballyhooed maiden voyage of the most famous ship of the century. This was the Titanic.

There is no evidence that Isidor felt the need to be on Titanic because of its much "ballyhooed" fame. It was simply time to go home. There was coal strike at the time and coal was being diverted from other ships so that Titanic could sail. It was one of the only ships sailing at that time. It was the right ship leaving at the right time for Isidor and Ida. So they took it.

Nathan Straus, grief-stricken and deeply mourning his brother and sister-in-law could not shake off his sense that he had had a rendezvous with history. The knowledge that he had avoided death permeated his

consciousness for the rest of his life, and until his death in 1931, he pursued his philanthropic activities with an intensity that was unrivaled in his time.

Although Nathan was devastated by the loss of his beloved brother and sister-in-law, he never said he felt “he had a rendezvous with history.” He did withdraw from business after the Titanic disaster. He devoted the rest of his life to philanthropic causes. But he was already doing this work before his brother and sister-in-law died. One can only say that he lost his heart for business. He was in his 60’s at the time. And he felt the loss of his loved ones very deeply.

Today, Natanya is a scenic resort city of 200,000 and headquarters to Israel’s thriving diamond trade - one of the most important industries in the country. And in almost every part of the city, there is some small reminder of Nathan Straus’s largesse, his humanity, and love for his people. His legacy lives on.

There are memorials around the world to Isidor and to Ida Straus, whose courage and philanthropy have inspired people. Edward Lauterbach described Isidor on May 27, 1912 as “calm, modest, unassuming, self-oblitative, always actuated by love for the people and interested in every scheme of altruism.” Both brothers and their families contributed greatly. Both deserve our respect and admiration.