

## The Origins of the Family

In this article I will begin at the beginning; the early history of the Straus family within the historical context that enabled the family to achieve their outstanding success both in Europe and in America. Although parts of this story have been told before, there is quite a lot of new information about the origins of the family, the factors that led to Lazarus' immigration to America and about the family members who chose to stay behind in Germany. Particular mention and thanks must be extended to Dr. Hans Steinebri and to Randy Selden for their expert research and documentation.

Most people find the history and genealogy of the Straus family confusing. There's good reason for that. Several factors must be considered. The Palatinate of Bavaria, where the family originated, was passed between France and Germany with alarming frequency. People spelled their names according to the common usage of the country where they resided. Jews were not required to take last names until 1808. In addition, family members frequently married cousins. For example, the family of Lina Guthertz, wife of Nathan Straus, was related through marriage five times. Lazarus Straus (1809-1898) married his first cousin Sara Straus (1823-1876), daughter of his uncle Salomon. Another factor that causes confusion is that the same first names were used over and over by large families; the boys might be named after a deceased grandfather and the girls after a deceased grandmother. This being the case, it's difficult to tell who is who and how they are related. In an effort to alleviate some of this confusion, the birth and death date are placed in parenthesis following a person's name when it might not be clear who that person was.

In the beginning of the 16th century, many occupations were forbidden to the Jews in Central Europe. They became moneylenders, pawnbrokers and dealers in used goods. They began leaving the cities, taking up residence in the villages of the imperial knights and counts where guilds weren't as influential. Here they were able to purchase land and open markets for agricultural products such as wine, grain and hides. Their relationship with the peasant population was mutually beneficial. Peasants, who had been leasing land from nobles, now were able to purchase lands with financing provided by the Jews. They helped the farmer with his traditional cash flow problem, providing him funds on the security of the coming harvests. Locally-based Jews were much more willing to extend credit to peasants than were city-based bankers not intimately involved with village life, and who wouldn't accept crops as payment. In addition, the mobility of the itinerant Jewish merchant meant local people didn't have to travel far to do their merchandising. They benefited from a variety of goods not otherwise available.

Village Jews were not peasants of a different ethnicity than that of their fellow villagers. They were urbanities transmuted into rural folk. But if the displaced Jews were miserable as the country Jews in the 18th century, by the 19th century they became leaders in the places where they lived. They were educated people who often took the initiative in suggesting better means of communicating and advancing education. They supported social institutions such as orphan asylums and hospitals. Their houses were large and solidly built and their furniture representative of the newest taste. They were scholars, reading Hebrew, German and French. This was certainly the case with the Straus family.

The earliest Straus we know about is Lazarus (Loeser/Loosser), born about 1715. At the time, Jews were not required to have last names and, following the Jewish custom of the day, this man might have been identified as Lazarus ben ....., meaning Lazarus son of..... Unfortunately, we do not know the father of this Lazarus, the progenitor of the Straus family.

The family lived in Dirmstein. Old documents report that Judt Loosser came to Dirmstein in 1733 (Judt may have meant Jew.) He appeared on the tax list of 1734, taking over the house of Simbles for which he paid eight Kreuzer, one Pfening. His two story house was on the Hildebrandgass at the corner of the little stream. At this time there were four Jews in Dirmstein.



The home of Judt Loosser was located behind this wall

Jakob (Jacques Loeser) (abt 1754-1834), son of Judt Loosser, was born in Dirmstein. He married Kendel (Sara or Karoline) Mayer between 1776 and 1779, moved to Niederkirchen, and obtained a piece of property there in 1784. He was a "Schutzjud," a protected Jew, having paid a tax for his sovereign's protection. By 1791 he is listed as a "burger;" a citizen. All six of Jakob's children were born in Niederkirchen. There were 48 Jews in Niederkirchen when Jakob moved his family to Otterberg in early 1802.



Otterberg Germany

On May 19, 1802 Jakob directed two acres of his land in Niederkirchen to be put up for public auction. The land was bought by Johannes Braun and Christoffel Edinger. Jakob received 105 Gulden, 4 Kreuzer.

In 1806 Napoleon convened the Assembly of Notables in Paris with the aim of developing laws that would determine the status of Jews. On July 22, 1806 he wrote to his Minister of the Interior stating, "Our purpose is to reconcile the beliefs of the Jews with the duties of a Frenchman and to make them useful citizens." The Department of Mont Tonnerre (Donnersberg) encompassed a large area whose capital was Mayence, later called Mainz. The department was entitled to nine deputies. The prefects of each department chose from the best known and best qualified Jews living in their respective departments. Jakob ben Lazar (Jacques Lazare/Jacques Loeser) was selected to be one of the representatives. This indicates that the family must have been prominent and generally honored even two hundred years ago. Jacques Lazare spent many months in Paris during 1806 and 1807 while representing his fellow Jews from the Department of Mont Tonnerre at the Assembly of Notables. One result of the Assembly was that, in 1808, Napoleon decreed all Jews must take a surname. People often took the surname of prominent villagers and many people in Otterberg became Strauses. You can imagine the difficulty when trying to trace their relationships. Jacques Loeser became Jacob Straus on October 24, 1808. Upon reading the old business documents and letters, it is very clear that spelling was a very casual affair, even among the educated people of the day.

Otterberg and the surrounding towns of Rhenish Bavaria, where the Strauses lived, changed hands between France and Germany for centuries. Names were spelled according to the French or German conventions depending on the year. Many letters became interchangeable, even among individuals writing their own name. For instance, Jacob Straus' name appears on documents as Jacques, Jakob, Jacob Lazare, Lazarus, Loeser, Loesser, Looser, Loosser and, after 1808, Straus.



Salomon,  
Son of Jacob Straus

One theory about the origin of the name Straus is that there were no street addresses in 1808. When asked where a person lived, the usual response was that he lived on a particular street in the house with a particular plaque on its outer wall. The house the Strauses lived in reportedly had a plaque with an ostrich on it and, when the family was required to take a surname, they simply adopted Straus, which means ostrich in German.



Getting back to Napoleon: another decree, signed by Napoleon and H.B. Maret, Secretary Minister of the State in March 17, 1808, enumerated the rules regulating the financial lives of Jews including the regulation of commerce. On June 26, 1810, a decree in the name of His Majesty the King "graciously grants" release of the Israelis Salomon Straus and Lazarus Straus Jr. of Otterberg from the determination of the ordinance of March 17, 1808. (This Lazarus Straus Jr. was the oldest son of Jacob Straus and the brother of Isaak and Salomon. He was the uncle of the Lazarus Straus who came to the United States in 1852.)

On January 22, 1810, Jacques and Isaac Strauss were granted passports to travel from Otterberg to Neustadt. Both listed their profession as cattle

merchants. In 1815, Jacob Straus undertook the supply of magazine provisions and in 1817, together with other relatives (Maas and Weil), gave a great deal of financial aid to the poor. He bought a large house on Hauptstrasse (Main Street) in Otterberg.

Jacob had six children. His oldest son Lazarus (1778-1862) had five children; son Isaak (1788-1838) had fourteen and third son Salomon (abt 1792-1872) had eleven children from three marriages. Salomon must have been one of the wealthiest men of Otterberg judging from the size of his house. In a marriage settlement dated April 3, 1818 wherein Salomon Straus, son of Jacob Straus and Johanna Weil, daughter of Salomon Weil, entered into their intention of marriage and recorded their agreement and arrangement, Jacob agreed to give Salomon half a barn on the side surrounded by a wall together with accessories and everything that was moveable, located in Otterberg, inspected (inhabited?) on one side by George Bader, on the other side by Isaac Straus estimated at a yearly profit of 172 Franken. Jacob Straus and his wife would receive unimpaired residence in this house as long as they lived with sole title reverting to Salomon upon their death. Should any argument arise between parent and child, the parents had the right to sole use upon payment to the son of 1650 Gulden or 3440 Franken and the son with his family was required to vacate the premises.

In his autobiography, Isidor Straus wrote of Lazarus and Salomon, "They were both cultured and educated gentlemen. They spoke French as fluently as German. Neither one was engaged in any regular business. They were land owners, and, I believe, when the crops were harvested, they bought the wheat, oats, clover and clover seed, which were the principal crops of that section, from their neighbors and then sent them to the market of Kaiserslautern and Mannheim, the chief commercial towns of the section."

Because of the Napoleonic decrees, the position of the Jews in the Palatines was better than in other parts of Bavaria. But, in 1809, the people of Baden had been given free access to trade while the Jews of Bavaria were still prohibited from any kind of trade, wholesale or retail, without a license. This license would not be issued without a most rigorous inquiry and the Municipal Council had to stipulate that said Jew was neither a usurer nor an immoral trader.

By 1817 the Jews of Otterberg had built a synagogue where they were relatively free to practice their religion. Their congregation was so successful that they constructed a new synagogue in 1835. But increased governmental regulation and taxation caused unrest and agitation in the villages. Lazarus (1809-1898), acting on behalf of the Jews of Otterberg, addressed the Mayor's office in January 1846 requesting the district government change the licensing requirements stating that they unjustly injured the honor and morality of every Jew. He further stated that they should be removed.

In 1847 the Mayor's office issued new regulations including a compulsory prayer for the king that was to be delivered in the synagogue before a listening, standing congregation. Other mandates tried to control the behavior of the Jews by prohibiting all announcements not directly related to the religious service and threatening police action for noncompliance. It is likely that these were regulations designed to control a population whose religious gatherings were eyed with suspicion. Although many aspects of daily life had improved for the Jewish community, there were still many restrictions.

The Revolution of 1848 sought to ameliorate conditions the populous considered intolerable. Lazarus was involved in the recruitment of volunteers and spent a considerable amount of money for the cause. Rebels hoped to establish a constitutional government. Dr. Steinebrei's research has revealed that, in the spring of 1849, Lazarus and others formed a defense committee. He was regarded as an anxious Jew, not a radical, but one who wanted a correction in the position of religious groups. He was one of twenty members of the town council and was designated to collect money for the Revolution. To protect himself and his family, Lazarus only collected money from the nearby town of Niederkirchen. After the failure of the Revolution, Lazarus and others was interrogated about their "tax" collecting since this was supposed to be a purely governmental function. He claimed he was collecting donations and he was not punished.

The political and economic conditions at this time were unsettled and the people suffered greatly. Landowners were unable to collect rent or interest on their property. Isaak had passed away in 1838 and Lazarus, as the oldest son, was executor of his estate. Lazarus' sister Barbara (Babette) asked that their



The home of Lazarus Straus in Otterberg. It was sold in 1870.

father's estate be divided and that the land be put up for auction. Isaak's widow Johanette kept the lot with her house on it. Although one parcel of land was auctioned, Lazarus was unable to collect the money due the estate and, therefore, was unable to compensate his siblings. Court papers in 1851 refer to bankruptcy. Lazarus was certainly not involved in criminal action but he was unable to provide the funds his sister and her family required. This factor, combined with the political suspicion thrust on him as a result of his participation in the Revolution of 1848, was integral in Lazarus' decision to immigrate to the United States.

Lazarus Straus' passport was issued from Sarraguemines France on May 26, 1852. It was better to say one was from France than from Bavaria. He probably traveled through France to Le Havre where he booked passage to Philadelphia. Although we have not found the name of his ship or its passenger manifest, family lore has it that Lazarus arrived in Philadelphia in 1852. This is certainly an area for future research.

In future articles the lives of Lazarus and his family in America will be described. Additional articles will be written about the families that stayed behind and those who chose to emigrate.