

Serving as the Straus Family Historian

By Joan Adler

The Lazarus Straus family originated in the southwestern part of Germany, coming from the towns of Darmstadt, Neiderkirchen and Otterberg. Lazarus Straus, the oldest of 14 children, was born in 1809. Lazarus emigrated to the U.S. in 1852 following his participation in the Revolution of 1848 and the dire financial conditions that resulted. He moved to Georgia where he became a pushcart peddler. This was a noble profession in the south because the peddler not only brought goods that were locally unavailable; he also brought news from one plantation to the next. After the Civil War, the family moved to New York where Lazarus and Isidor, the eldest of his children, opened L. Straus & Son, importers of china, glass, porcelain, clocks, etc. In 1874, they opened a crockery department in the basement of R.H Macy's, were part-owners by 1888 and sole owners by 1896.

Isidor Straus was the family member most involved in merchandising. He also served in the House of Representatives and was a founder of The Educational Alliance and Montefiore home for Invalids (which later became Montefiore Hospital). He is perhaps best known for having drowned on the Titanic along with his wife Ida. His younger brother Nathan was known for his philanthropy – primarily for his efforts to bring pasteurization to the world. He also became an active Zionist, building the Jerusalem Health Center and contributing greatly to Jerusalem University. Oscar, the youngest of Lazarus Straus' children, was known as a public servant. He served as Minister to Constantinople, Ambassador to Turkey, and was the first Jewish Cabinet member serving as Secretary of Commerce and Labor under Theodore Roosevelt.

I am neither trained as a genealogist nor historian. The lack of training has worked to my benefit. I do not know what I am 'supposed' to be doing so I invent as I go along. I follow leads that take me to wonderful, unexpected places. Perhaps I waste some time along the way, but I have never been disappointed with the result of any search. I have come to think of my work as 'social history.' By this I mean placing the details of people's lives into context: learning about the times in which they lived, the political, social, and economic conditions that affected their daily interactions, and how they chose to deal with these factors. I am the luckiest of people because I get to work at something I love.