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VIVE LA FRANCE

# ANCESTORS

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## CALIFORNIA'S JEWISH FRENCH HERITAGE

**W**hile Santa Barbara's heritage is imbued with Spanish and Mexican culture, for more than 150 years Santa Barbara has been enhanced with the influx of other foreign immigrant communities as well: Italian, Chinese, Basque, Japanese, and Filipino.

Surprisingly, one of Santa Barbara's first ethnic communities is probably the least known: the French Jewish population.

Santa Barbara's first French community was comprised of Jewish

refugees/settlers, and with them came familial links to the most significant Jewish families in California history.

In the 19th century, the tiny Alsace-Lorraine region of northeast France along the Rhine was home to nearly half the French Jewish population. Following the Franco-Prussian War, in 1871, this area was annexed by Germany, placing it under anti-Semitic policies and with it, a return to the German language. The Alsatian Jews were obliged to either become German citizens or leave their homes. Since they identified as French, about one-third of the population, particularly young families, emigrated to France (Paris) or America. Abroad they found work, established themselves and opened the door for their relations to immigrate and become prosperous in

*Corner of State and Ortega  
(photo courtesy John C.  
Woodward Collection)*



America. Especially appealing to Europeans was the West Coast – California – and its temperate climate.

Intriguingly, Jews could operate with a great deal of autonomy in California during and after the Gold Rush. California was the ultimate land of fresh starts, no questions asked, and no pedigree need be proffered.

Part of the latitude afforded the Jewish community was the “frontier-pioneer” culture of the American West. The individualistic spirit of the Wild West had a “live and let live” philosophy that proposed that a man need only be judged on his own merits. Thus the early Jewish pioneers, as peddlers and merchants, were free to move up and down the state and become successful.

Because the *Californios* and Mexicans looked askance at all the new “gringos” coming into the state after 1850, Jews were not singled out apart from that; there was no further need to discriminate along denominational differences.

## THE MOVE TO SANTA BARBARA

The Jewish immigrant story in Santa Barbara begins in 1868, with a Frenchman by the name of Cerf Levy.

When his cousin in California offered him a job in his store, Cerf left Alsace-Lorraine with his wife and two little boys and headed to the land of opportunity. Levy joined his cousin as part of an extended family of incredible entrepreneurial immigrants in America.

His cousin, Solomon Lazard, had opened the first Jewish-owned department store in Los Angeles (later evolved as the *City of Paris*) and was a founder of the Los Angeles Water Company. Solomon’s cousins founded the famous Lazard Freres import-export house and later became international bankers.

Solomon’s wife was Caroline Newmark, daughter of the renowned Rabbi. Joseph Newmark, a founder of the Hebrew Benevolent Society and the B’nai B’rith Congregation (Wilshire Boulevard Temple). Solomon’s sister-in-law was Harriet Newmark Meyer — grandmother of future publisher Katherine Graham.

This was a distinguished extended family.

## THE LEVYS AND THE KAUFFMANS

By the end of the year, Cerf considered opening his own dry goods store and decided to move north to a town that was half the size of Los Angeles: Santa Barbara. In 1868, he settled here when the population was 2,500 and largely Catholic. (The town’s first Protestant church was still a year away.) Cerf’s clan was the first-known Jewish family in Santa Barbara. While they knew Yiddish, they spoke French.

In 1872, Cerf and his wife, Sarah Rheims, added daughter Rachel to the family. Until she started school, she only knew French – no English or Spanish. (She recited her prayers in Hebrew, until she asked her mother around the age of 8, “Doesn’t God understand French?” So her mother hastened to procure a French prayer book.)

Cerf’s own progeny contributed to the family’s legacy of accomplishments.

His son Joseph made a name for himself south of the border. A musical prodigy, Joseph had studied violin in Paris as a child, at 14 was playing with the San Francisco Symphony, and went on tour at 16, which led him to Colima, Mexico. He settled there, founded the Lira Colimense orchestra and became a legendary master teacher, instructing not only music but also French and English (he spoke Hebrew, German, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish.) His name is still revered there to this day.

Rachel married another Alsatian Jew, Jules Kauffman of Los Angeles, and went on to become the most prominent Jewish woman in Southern California society. She started *L’Alliance Française* in Los Angeles in 1904; was a planning commissioner for the City of Los Angeles in 1919, President of the Los Angeles Arts Commission, was a social service commissioner and society columnist, and listed in *Who’s Who Among The Women in California*.

## MORE THAN ORDINARILY INTELLIGENT

Active in Jewish life in Los Angeles, Mrs. Jules Kauffman was president of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhood, founding president of Women of Reform Judaism-Pacific District; president of the Council of Jewish Women, Los Angeles; president of Conference of Jewish Women’s Organizations; board member of

the National Council of Jewish Woman; and co-founder of their Los Angeles branch.

Although Rachel Levy Kauffman grew up in Santa Barbara when it had no temple, it is clear that her parents were able to retain and impart their religious traditions, so that their daughter could be a beacon to other Jewish immigrants and residents.

Cerf's son, Leon Levy, attended the brand-new Santa Barbara College to learn English, graduated local schools, and then clerked in northern California. In 1885, he opened a wholesale and retail liquor store on State Street, featuring both imported and domestic wines, liquors, and cigars, with a specialty in California wines.

Cerf was the first but not the last Levy in town, nor the only Jewish merchant.

In 1870, Joseph Levy (no relation) also moved to Santa Barbara from France. He opened the town's first jewelry store, and operated a bean brokerage firm next door to Levy, at 520 State Street. Joseph and his wife, Henrietta Bollack, had four daughters and two sons. Son Michel married Elma Levy (no relation) and founded the long-time Levy Shoes Store, a family business and mainstay on State Street for 75 years. Their daughter Camille married another French Jew, Henri Levy, brother of Abraham Achilles Levy of the famed Bank of A. Levy (and, no, still no relation).

In 1875, a number of Jewish families traveled together from Alsace-Lorraine, disembarking at the newly constructed Stearns Wharf. The town had changed considerably in just seven years since Cerf Levy's arrival. The population had increased by nearly 30 percent; the first telegraph line had come in from San Francisco, gas lights were lit for the first time, and Jose Lobero had opened his fantastic new theater — the first community playhouse in California.

The center of downtown at this time was at Ortega and State, and these new merchants wasted no time in setting up shop and making a success of themselves in the 500, 600, and 700 blocks of State Street between Haley and De la Guerra — from Liebman's Bargain House to Theodore Breslauer's IXL saloon, stables, and stores.

The descendants of these early Jewish settlers were to become important retailers and merchants in Santa Barbara. While most of their names are unknown to us in the 21st century, their businesses were significant and longtime State Street landmarks. These included,

besides Levy Shoes, Eisenburg Clothing which became the White House, Dreyfus Real Estate, Harris Jewelers, and travel agent Byron Abraham.

About the time of their arrival, the Sept 28, 1872, issue of *The Santa Barbara Index* described their new homeland: "*Santa Barbara is at present prospering. People are continually moving in, drawn hither by the fine climate and beautiful surroundings. It has four protestant churches — Congregational, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, and a population of more than ordinary intelligence and culture.*"

## NEW JERUSALEM

Santa Barbara seemingly had everything going for it — but one thing it lacked was a Jewish temple. So the early Jews in Santa Barbara held their services in private homes, as a gathering of believers to pray and offer benedictions. For important services (i.e., High Holy Days) local Jews went out of town, sometimes to Los Angeles, but most often to San Francisco. San Francisco was a well-populated and highly cultured city, which appealed to their French-European upbringing, while Los Angeles remained undeveloped until after the turn of the century. When the Jewish merchants left for San Francisco, their local stores would be shuttered, and the occasion would be respectfully noted in the local newspaper. The September 17, 1890, edition of the *Morning Press* had such an item: "Yesterday was Rosh-Hashana, the Jewish new year of 5651 and was celebrated by the Hebrew population."

The local Jewish community usually had to depend on rabbis traveling between Los Angeles and San Francisco to perform ceremonies such as marriages, funerals, and bar mitzvahs. Young Jewish students studying for their bar mitzvahs would go south to Los Angeles or north to San Francisco to find a teacher. During this time, they would stay with relatives or other friends from the Jewish community.

At the end of the 19th century, a yeshiva was established in "New Jerusalem" to the south in Ventura near Camarillo. Now known as El Rio, the area was then called New Jerusalem and was settled by many Jews after Simon Cohn and his relatives launched a bustling business enterprise there — stores and saloons — to serve

the farmers in the area. The yeshiva was sponsored by none other than Achilles Levy, the prominent businessman and founder of the bank that still bears his name; the yeshiva was conducted by Hyman Cohen.

## THE EASTERN EUROPEANS


One of the earliest ceremonies noted in Santa Barbara was a circumcision held on Monday, February 25, 1895. The local Jewish community gathered at the home of Meyer Iseman at 212 De La Guerra Street, for the ceremony to bring his infant son, Marc, into the bond of Israel. Because there were no rabbis in Santa Barbara, the Jewish community brought up the famed rabbi Abraham Blum from Congregation B'nai B'rith Los Angeles to perform the ceremony. The event was attended by the boy's grandmother Mrs. Isaac Goldstein (Rebecca Abrams), Flora Breslauer, the widow Mrs. Cerf Levy, Mrs. Waldauer, and Mrs. Joseph Levy.

However, it was still a struggle for Jews to maintain their religious traditions, when there were so few in Santa Barbara. Some left town for cities with a bigger Jewish population and a temple. Some assimilated into the gentile culture usually through marriage, because they could not easily find another of their faith to marry in such a small town. Since many of the Jews in Santa Barbara were merchants, they also simply traveled on to other locations. (e.g., Meyer Iseman moved to Visalia the year following his son's circumcision.) Lack of

opportunity to easily observe their religious traditions may have led some Jews to other denominations (e.g., the obituary of Michel Levy indicated his funeral was a Unitarian service; and Louis Dreyfus was noted as an Episcopalian).

This was all to change after the turn of the century, from 1900 to 1920, when Santa Barbara's population tripled in size. Part of this increase included a new wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants into town from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Austria-Hungary, and the Ukraine.

Nearly a half-century after the first Jewish families came to Santa Barbara, these plucky Jewish immigrants were able to form a minyan, create a religious community, and establish a temple.

This year marks the 90th anniversary of Congregation B'nai B'rith ("Sons of the Covenant"). Its founding brought to fruition the dreams of fathers and grandfathers from other countries to worship and pray in peace in their new homeland, and the promise that their traditions and culture will be remembered into the next century. 

*The Presbyterian congregation built one of the earliest protestant churches in 1874 with a landmark steeple rising 130 feet (seen here on State Street between Figueroa and Anapamu) (photo courtesy Santa Barbara Historical Society)*

