

Samuel Oscar Alexander

California Merchant

While the Forty-niners were busy searching for gold, Samuel Oscar Alexander was in New York. Not until 1852 did this German-Pole arrive in Stockton, California, to join a brother, and, unlike the mass of migrants who had preceded him, he did not go in search of the precious metal. Instead, he bought out his brother and went into the clothing business with a Missourian named Friedlander. In 1858, after he had been naturalized at Stockton, he moved to San Francisco. He must have brought some capital with him, for on his arrival in the Bay City he joined Congregation Sherith Israel and bought two permanent seats — “life seats.”

Later records show that he continued in the clothing trade. During the 1880's he entered into partnership with his son-in-law, Isaac Hoffman, and in the following decade the firm was known as Hoffman, Alexander, & Co. Samuel Alexander died at Merced, California, in 1894.

The following questionnaire was filled out probably by one of the numerous assistants employed by Hubert Howe Bancroft, the historian, who was collecting material for monumental histories of the Pacific states and countries. In all likelihood, it was recorded sometime in the 1880's. A photostat copy of the original statement, which is in the Bancroft Library of the University of California, is found in the American Jewish Archives.

It is interesting to observe that Alexander refers to his wife as a Polish Jewess. Her parents had indeed come from Poland, but she was a native American. In those days, as well as today, immigrants huddled together and sought to marry a spouse from their part of the Old World, even if one generation removed. Alexander's account is useful, however, not only for this reason and for its description of his early career in America, but also because it discloses the reason for his emigration.

Q. What is your name in full?

A. Samuel Oscar Alexander.

- Q. When and where were you born?
A. I was born in Nakel, in Prussia, in 1836, Aug. the 19.
- Q. What was your father's name?
A. Oscar Alexander.
- Q. And your mother's?
A. My mother's name was Dora Samuels. My father and mother were both Jews and my wife is a Polish Jew.
- Q. Where was your father born?
A. My father and mother were both born in Nakel. He was a retail dry goods merchant there. He died soon after I was born, and my mother took charge of the business.
- Q. What kind of a place is Nakel?
A. Nakel is a small commercial place of about 4,000 people.
- Q. Where [were] there any other children?
A. Yes, nine; I was the youngest.
- Q. Where and for how long did you go to school?
A. I went to a private school in Nakel for five years, from eight to age thirteen. There was no public schools in those days; they have only had them since '49.
- Q. What induced you to come to California?
A. Well, I was apprenticed to a brother-in-law of mine in the tailoring business, but my mother died, and a brother of mine in St. Louis wrote for me to come out because he thought there was more chance for me in this country; so my brother-in-law let me leave the tailoring business. I went from Nakel to Radling [Radolin], from there to Hamburg, and from there to New York. I arrived in New York on the fourth of July, 1849, and thought the boys with the [fire]crackers would kill me. I had never seen them before.
- Q. And then?
A. From New York I went to St. Louis. I was there for some time in business with my brother. Then another brother of mine, who was in Stockton [California], wrote me to come to him, and I agreed to go. I started on the steamship, "California," a very small steamer, but it was a very long trip. We

had not been able to get a through ticket; so we had to wait in Panama for almost a month, while those who had through tickets went along. At last I got a ticket from a man who had died; I paid \$100 for it, and arrived here in July, [18]52, going at once to Stockton to my brother, who was a merchant tailor. I stayed there some time and then went into partnership with a man named Freeland [Friedlander], the two of us buying out my brother's business.

Q. Yes, and how long did you stay there?

A. I stayed there until '57. I had got a little money and so thought I would like to go back to the old country, but I could not stop there. I did not like the country any more, so I came back, reaching here once more in '58.

Q. What did you do then?

A. I opened a small store here on Clay and Montgomery [Streets in San Francisco] but did not make a success of it. So I moved to the corner of Dupont and Jackson, where I did very well.

Q. That was right in the heart of Chinatown?

A. It was not Chinatown in those days.

Q. How long did you stay there?

A. I stayed there until the [Civil] War ended, which was in '66 or '67. Then I went into the importing business. I opened a small store in a basement on California Street and did very well.

Q. You had to send all your stuff by ship in those days?

A. Yes, we had no railroads then. I had a man in New York who used to manufacture the goods for me and ship them from there.

Q. How long did you stop there [on California Street]?

A. Well, I could not have stayed there very long because I have been here for seventeen years, right in this building. Since two years ago I have gone into business with my son-in-law, Isaac Hoffman.

Q. And what are your ideas about politics?

A. Well, I have always been a strong Democrat.

Q. Why?

A. Well, I don't exactly know. I was always very much attached to the South. In local politics I have no choice.

Q. And you are still of the same religion?

A. Yes, I am an Orthodox Jew and belong to a church [synagogue] on the corner of Post St.

Q. And you hold office in that church, I suppose?

A. No, I never held office in either churches or politics. I have enough to do to attend to my business.

Q. How many children have you?

A. I have three boys and two girls. Two of the boys are with me in the store, and one girl is married.

Q. And whom did you marry?

A. I was married in 1860 to a Miss Simons in Stockton Street church [synagogue]. Her parents came from Poland; she was born in this country and educated in New York.

Q. And you have a very nice home, I suppose?

A. Yes, I have a very nice home on Van Ness Avenue. I used to live in a house of my own on O'Farrel Street, but it was so much in town that I was obliged to leave it.

Q. And your children, do they go to school here?

A. Yes, my children all went through the public schools.

Q. And are they all Jews?

A. Yes, they are all Jews, although I never restricted them; after they got to a certain age, I always allowed them to believe in what they liked. I am a sort of freethinker, you know.

Q. And do you think California is still going ahead?

A. Yes, I think it is steadily improving and that it will continue to do so, but what we want is more immigration. I don't mean Chinamen, although I think they are a necessary evil.

Q. How would you stop them?

A. Well, that is more than I can tell you.

Q. And do you think that a boom does good or harm?

A. Well, I think that a boom does a certain amount of good.

- Q. And what is your idea on the tariff question?
A. Well, I think that most people have a wrong idea about tariff. I think a high tariff should be put on luxuries and taken off necessities.
- Q. And do you think wine is a luxury?
A. Yes, I don't think wine is a necessity.
- Q. Do you think, then, that the tariff should be high on wine?
A. No, I think if the tariff was reduced on wine we should be able to compete with other places. But it is hard to decide.
- Q. And you think San Francisco is improving?
A. Yes, I think there is a steady improvement. There is no boom or excitement, but I think it is going ahead. Outside property [beyond city limits] is a good investment and is going up in price.
- Q. What do you think the population will be, say, in about twenty years?
A. Well, I think it ought to be close on a million.

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