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Rethinking the American Jewish Experience

## What's the Matter with Warsaw?

*Norton B. Stern and William M. Kramer*

In the early decades of American California following the gold rush, there was a hierarchy of ethnic standing. It was as pervasive as it was unjustified. Detailed reading of the early Western press indicates a ranking in which the top rung was occupied by those of American birth and Northern European ancestry. Equal to them were the English-speaking from the British Isles (except the Irish), and their cousins from the various British colonies. Closest to these were the French, who in many cases were style-setters and cultural leaders. Just below were those from the German states and principalities and the linguistically related peoples from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Further down were the Slavic immigrants, including the Poles, and at the bottom of the ladder were the racially distinct Asians, native Indians, blacks, and American Latinos. This unfair and prejudiced social ladder was paralleled in the rest of the country.

While the Jewish community as seen from the outside appeared to be highly united, social critics and the Jews themselves were well aware that they functioned with the same set of social priorities based on geographical origins. The main subethnic rivalry among Western Jews was between the Germans and the Poles. The Germans proclaimed their superiority and the Poles did not deny it. To be from Germany meant being a part of the best of Western European civilization, but being from Poland implied an origin stemming from an underdeveloped and relatively primitive country. Despite a number of prominent Poles in American history, their role was overshadowed by the Germans, who brought to these shores a sense of their superiority over their Eastern neighbors.

Every careful analysis of federal census data, registers of voters, Jewish organizational and synagogal records shows that for the West, Jews of Polish origin were numerically predominant over Germanic Jews.<sup>1</sup> Polish Jews, whether from Russian-occupied or Prussian-occu-

pied Poland, resented what they regarded as German Jewish snobbishness. What is more they felt that the religious tradition (*Minhag Polen*) as preserved by them was far more authentic than the Germanic ritual (*Minhag Ashkenaz*). Curiously, American Sephardic and many French Jews stayed aloof from these distinctions.

The words of Harriet Levy of San Francisco give a picture of the caste and class divisions in Western American Jewish life.

That the Baiern [Germans] were superior to us, we knew. We took our position as the denominator takes its stand under the horizontal line. On the social counter the price tag "Polack" confessed second class. Why Poles lacked the virtue of Bavarians I did not understand. . . . I accepted the convention that our excellence was not that of the Baierns because we were Polish.<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to "pass" as a German rather than a Polish Jew, Harriet Levy claimed German origin for her Polish-born parents when the matter came up in public school. She was far from unique. All Polish origins were considered second-class, but many could be disguised by using the Germanic names for Polish towns.

However, one city could not be hidden behind a German veil. Its name was inevitably associated with Poland, and those for whom it was a known birthplace were readily identified as Poles. Warsaw was that city. Therefore, Warsaw was virtually suppressed as a place of origin for Jewish families that sought upward mobility and social esteem among their German coreligionists. Family memories have glossed over Warsaw. Where biographical data were called for, that city was ignored and alternative data were provided that implied origins other than Warsaw.

For example, when Morris Greenberg's descendants supplied information on him when the brass and bronze foundry established by him in 1854 in San Francisco was one hundred years old, they simply gave as his origin the true fact that he had been a foundry apprentice as a youth in Paris. Unmentioned was the fact that he was born in Warsaw in 1823.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein the biographic material supplied by the descendants of John Jones, the first Jew to serve as president of the Los Angeles City Council (1870-1871), clearly implied that he was born in England. An 1889 account reads that he was born in 1800 and "his early life was spent in London."<sup>4</sup> Another account, written in 1931,

specifically described him as "an Englishman, his early life was spent in London."<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, it was recently discovered that on the monument over his grave, Warsaw is incised as his place of birth.<sup>6</sup>

Even the descendants of Conrad Prag had no idea where he was born. Prag was the father of Florence Prag Kahn of San Francisco, who was the first Jewish woman to serve in the United States Congress. The information of his Warsaw birth in 1831 was apparently suppressed in transmission, but an obituary account in 1883 by a San Francisco correspondent printed in an Eastern Jewish publication established Warsaw as Conrad Prag's birthplace.<sup>7</sup>

The distinguished San Francisco attorney and historian Kenneth C. Zwerin recalled an incident which occurred when his maternal great-grandfather, who had been born in Warsaw, died in the Bay City:

My mother told me that there was a feud as part of the family wanted to put in the death notice the fact that he was "a native of Warsaw," and the others wanted it to be "Germany." I was told that it was resolved by omitting any place [to indicate] where he was born.<sup>8</sup>

While Warsaw was anathema, all throughout the West the names of obscure Polish towns are found on headstones, in biographical accounts, and in public records of Jews. Their obscurity protected them from revealing the Polish past. Places like Kempen, Thorn, Exin, Fihlene, Rogasen, Nakel, and Adelman, though Polish, might pass as German, but Warsaw—never!

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### Notes

1. See Norton B. Stern and William M. Kramer, "The Major Role of Polish Jews in the Pioneer West," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly*, July 1976, pp. 326-344; Norton B. Stern and William M. Kramer, "The Polish Jews in Posen and in the Early West," *ibid.*, July 1978, pp. 327-329.

2. Harriet Lane Levy, 920 O'Farrell Street (Garden City, N.Y., 1947), pp. 210-211.

3. Robert O'Brien, "Written in Bronze . . . and Courage: The Story of M. Greenberg's Sons," *Architect and Engineer*, November 1953, pp. 14 ff. *American Israelite* (Cincinnati), May 23, 1884, p. 5.
4. *An Illustrated History of Los Angeles County California* (Chicago, 1889), p. 764.
5. William A. Spalding, *History of Los Angeles City and County California* (Los Angeles, 1931), vol. 2, p. 17.
6. Home of Peace Cemetery, Colma, California, Plot E, Section 5, Lot 2, Grave 4.
7. *Jewish Record* (Philadelphia), January 4, 1883, p. 3.
8. Kenneth C. Zwerin to Norton B. Stern, March 4, 1983, p. 2.