
Rethinking the American Jewish Experience
“What’s the Matter with Warsaw?”:
A Comment

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The article in the November 1985 issue of the *Archives* by Stern and Kramer was, unfortunately, based on a misreading of the situation in San Francisco. The theme of the paper, “the main subethnic rivalry among Western Jews was between the Germans and the Poles,” does not correspond to the effective distinction in San Francisco. Thus to write of “Prussian-occupied Poland” and the resentment of “German Jewish snobbishness” misses the point. Harriet Levy may have thought of her family as “Polacks,” but no member of my mother’s family and its wide range of friends and acquaintances in Congregation Sherith Israel ever thought of themselves as such. They were, as my great-grandfather Jacob Ash’s tombstone notes, “native[s] of Prussia,” or as that of a great-uncle indicates, “. . . of Inowroclaw, Posen.” I am not at all sure how much they resented the claimed “superiority” of the Bayerische of Congregation Emanu-el, whom they thought of as Jewishly illiterate and perhaps even as *Viehhändler* (“cattle traders”), by which they would mean horse thieves. For them Kempen, Thorn, etc., etc., did not mean Poland, they meant Posen; and for them Posen was Prussia.

Footnote 1 in the article suggests that Stern and Kramer have built more on Harriet Levy’s self-identification than is called for. Historians may, for whatever reason, designate the San Francisco Jews from Posen as Poles (such they were before the partition of Poland), but they themselves never did. They did not “pass” as Germans, for they had been civically subjects of the King of Prussia; they spoke German not Yiddish, although they also had their own *Posen Jüdisch*; and they saw themselves as culturally German. One had only to be brought up in such a household to recognize how fatuous the German-Pole distinction is.

Warsaw was, however, another story. It was not Prussia. It was

Poland, or even worse, Russia. Warsaw was then a problem for those who *were* “passing” as Germans in that they belonged to Congregation Emanu-el. Such was the case of Morris Greenberg (I was acquainted with his family), and such may have been the case with the Zwerin family. (I recall that he was an assistant scoutmaster of the Emanu-el troop.) Warsaw would have been an “embarrassment.”

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