

Two Times the Stranger . . .

*I must be two times the stranger, it seems—
Once for my people, and once for my dreams.
—Samuel Hoffenstein*

Few of the travelers on busy Highway 395 notice the plot of desert land north of Independence where a few grave markers are enclosed by a woven wire fence. Fewer of those travelers pause to walk across the sandy shoulder of the highway to read the inscriptions on these markers. There are other graves in this enclosure, but only four stones stand to mark the only Jewish cemetery in Eastern California.

One inscription reads, "In Memory of Hulday Levy, Native of Gollub, Prussia." Another: "Johanna Wood, Beloved Wife of Louis Wood, Native of Gollub, Germany." And there is "Joseph Levy, July 1, 1900, 17 years. Ever Remembered." Related to the

others only by his Jewishness is "Infant Son of J. & E. Elkeles, died July 24, 1892, aged 2 mo. 5 days. Asleep." The body of baby Elkeles was brought the weary miles from Bishop that he might lie in sacred ground with others of God's chosen people. There was a cemetery in Bishop, but evidently J. & E. Elkeles could not bring themselves to bury their son among people of another faith.

How many of us have ever heard of Gollub, Prussia, or Gollub, Germany, as the case may be? The name Prussia belongs to an earlier age, so we turn to a map to locate it. And we find that East Prussia lies in Russia and West Prussia is now part of Poland. Yet, from Gollub, Prussia, and its neighboring hamlet, Lankorch, came a group of Jewish immigrants that traveled almost halfway around the world to meet again in Inyo County and establish a Jewish family-of-families.

What brought these immigrants to this semi-arid valley, so sparsely settled in the middle eighteen hundreds? The story begins back in Gollub and Lankorch. In 1800 Germany as a country was non-existent, being only a group of principalities. Feudalism prevailed, and many people were held no better than slaves. The Jews were under constant suspicion. Houses were searched, books were forbidden and burned if found, letters were opened and spies were placed in the classrooms. Living in dire poverty and in constant fear for their lives, Jewish families began to dream of a new life in America. A trickle of emigration began. Sometimes parents could afford to send only one child, but send him they did, trusting that the rest of the family might follow at a later time.

During this period of fear and unrest Isaac Harris was born in Lankorch in 1832. In 1841 Mary Sultan was born in Gollub and Louis Joseph was born there in 1844. Isaac Harris was the first to leave, for when he was sixteen years old his family knew

he might be called up for military service at any time. At great sacrifice they scraped together enough money to buy his passage to New York. In the early eighteen-fifties Mary Sultan emigrated with her parents and her two sisters, Huldah (the stonemason misspelled her name) and Johanna. The remaining members of the Harris family left at the same time and in 1857 the Levy family pulled up roots and left Prussia with their son Henry, then eight years old.

In New York these families seem to have clung together as they had in Prussia, hampered as they were by their ignorance of the English language and their lack of skills. The trades they had known in the old world were of little use to them here. Moreover, some of the immigrants had had very little education. One trait they shared was determination. They also had intelligence and a sense of destiny, so they took whatever jobs they could find and bided their time.

It was a time of change. Gold had been discovered in California and the westward movement had begun. New York was no longer regarded as the final destination of the Jewish immigrants. Some were shrewd enough to realize that there was money to be made in California, not by digging for gold, but by providing goods and services to those who were doing the digging. So, one by one, they left New York, making the trip around the Horn in dirty, vermin-infested ships, enduring storms, fires and near starvation until they finally sailed into San Francisco harbor. Perhaps Mary Sultan and her family were among the first to make the trip. At least her tales of that miserable voyage were well known to her children and grandchildren.

Louis Joseph had left Gollub when he was only twelve years old. He stowed away on a sailing vessel, not even knowing where

he was going. On the ship he met a Catholic priest who befriended him and taught him to read and write and to speak Spanish. Reaching South America, for that was their destination, they wandered together through the small villages, sometimes walking and sometimes on muleback. When and how Louis reached California is not recorded, but he went from there to New York to meet his family, just arriving from Gollub. The Josephs left immediately for San Francisco, where their friends were already established. So, again, the Harrises, the Sultans, the Josephs and the Levys were reunited.

In San Francisco the parents of these families continued to live much as they had in Prussia. They found it difficult to adjust to the free, exciting life of early California. The Sultan family with its three daughters was especially handicapped for there were no sons to pave the way for them. The girls were kept as cloistered as daughters had been in Gollub. Probably the parents were delighted when Mary and Isaac Harris fell in love. The young people were married in 1861 and left immediately for Aurora, a mining town in Nevada (but thought to be in California), with twenty stores, twenty-two saloons and three thousand people.

In Aurora Isaac and Mary Harris went into business "on a shoestring." They evidently prospered, but Aurora was waning and Isaac began to look for another business venture. Not far away, in the Owens River Valley, Bend City, San Carlos and Kearsarge were booming. The soldiers at Camp Independence offered not only protection from violence but also a source of income. So, in 1865, the Harrises loaded their possessions on muleback and headed south to become pioneer settlers in Thomas Edwards' new town of Independence. On arriving, Isaac Harris laid a plank across two barrels and his saloon was ready for customers. The family lived first in a tent, then in an adobe building which housed both home

and business. After the earthquake of 1872 destroyed the adobe, a wooden structure was built on the corner of Edwards and Market Streets, no longer just a saloon but a well-stocked village store. All transactions of any value were conducted here and the store served as both bank and express office.

That Isaac Harris was held in high regard is evident; he was the first secretary of the Masonic lodge and the third treasurer of Inyo County. Due to his generosity the homeless Methodist congregation had land on which to build its church.

In 1868 Minnie Harris was born in Independence, the first of the Harris children to be born in this new town. She is described as being petite with blond hair and big blue eyes. We are indebted to Minnie for her reminiscences of those early days. She was only four years old when the 1872 earthquake struck in the early morning hours. The first rumble sounded like the stage rattling across the cobbles of the creek as it crossed Edwards Street, but it took the family only a second to realize what was happening and all ran outside. Not all; the baby was still in his crib and Isaac Harris rushed inside to rescue him just before the adobe collapsed.

After the second courthouse was built it became the custom to put up a Christmas tree there and all the young people saved their gifts to be placed under the tree and distributed by Santa on Christmas morning. More than one of the girls, according to Minnie, resorted to wrapping up broken dishes and cracked vases, each hoping to receive the greatest number of packages on Christmas morning and thus prove herself the most popular young lady in town!

Minnie attended the grammar school at Camp Independence, either riding horseback or crowding with other children into a spring wagon, the school bus of that day. Sometimes as many as

seventeen children jammed into the wagon and it's not surprising to learn that one day little Minnie slipped on the wagon wheel and broke a leg and an arm. She had always been a great favorite with the children and now she was petted and made over more than ever.

Meanwhile Isaac Harris had taken a partner, Nathan Rhine. Together they opened a branch store in the new mining town of Panamint and did a flourishing business during the few years that camp was booming. Then, in 1884, Isaac Harris sold his share of the partnership to Nathan Rhine and departed with his family for San Francisco. There he bought a fine sixteen-room house, but did not live long to enjoy it. Independence was not forgotten. When he received news of the big fire of 1886 he sent clothes and money to the Rhine family and a new store soon rose on the ashes of the old—the Pines Cafe of today.

Minnie was always homesick for Owens Valley. She and her younger sisters used to sit on the front steps of their elegant home and cry because passersby didn't stop to visit with them, or even say "Hello." How happy she must have been to marry Louis Joseph and leave that unfriendly city! Louis tried several business ventures before he moved his family to Big Pine and opened a small store. His two sons, Irving and Douglas, shared in the success of the business which prospered to become the Joseph stores of Bishop and Lone Pine. Louis Joseph didn't forget the lean years. He never refused to give a man money for a meal and when one of his sons turned away a miner who was down on his luck his father said, "You don't know what it is to be hungry."

Henry Levy had not fared too well in San Francisco so, in 1874, his old friend Isaac Harris suggested that he come to Independence. Here he bought a small bakery where Austin's General

Store now dispenses serve-yourself gasoline and with a little remodeling opened it as the Miners' Hotel. Soon after arriving in Independence he had married Huldah Sultan, sister of Mary, but their happiness was brief, for Huldah died in childbirth and lies in the Jewish cemetery. In 1876 he married Louis Joseph's sister Mary, just seventeen years old, and together Henry and Mary went into the hotel business.

When the Miners' Hotel seemed too small for their growing needs, the Levys bought the Blaney House in 1884. This was the oldest hotel in the valley, for the Blaneys had purchased a lot from Thomas Edwards in 1868, paying him sixty-five dollars, and built a small lodging house south of the creek that ran by the courthouse. But the fire of 1886 wiped out the town and the family was left without hotel or home. Those were difficult days for Henry Levy, but he was not daunted. Back to the old location he went and before the year was out began building the Independence Hotel. The property was sold to the City in 1944, ending seventy years of continuous hotel ownership by the the Levy family. When that familiar old landmark, which had been so close to the pulse of the village, burned in 1963 it marked the end of an era for Independence.

Isaac Harris had known Louis Wood in San Francisco. They were brothers-in-law, for Louis Wood had married Johanna, the third Sultan sister. It took little urging to bring the Woods to Independence, which had been so kind to the Harrises and the Levys. They opened a little store where the jail now stands and the family business passed to their son George and his wife Ella. I remember it as a rather dark little store, its shelves stocked with canned goods and staples, its tables piled with overalls and bolts of dry goods. A tinkling bell summoned George or Ella from the family living quarters at the rear of the store for a session that was half social

call, half business transaction. White Roman hyacinths from the Woods' garden bloom in our flower border, a tenuous link with the past. When the property was sold to the City a memorial rose garden served as a little park on that corner; the plants came from old homesites in Independence.

So, again, we come full-circle in the story of the Harrises, Josephs, Levys and Woods, the Jewish family-of-families of Inyo County. But what of those brides who had followed their husbands into the desert camps and towns? The feeling persists that they, not their husbands, were "two times the stranger." Knowing that Mary Joseph Levy had lived out her life in Independence, I went to call on her two daughters, my friends Birdie Yandell and Edith Brierly. Of eight children of the Levy family only these two remain, the oldest and the youngest.

Rich in years, Birdie has many memories of those early days in Independence. And what memories—sad, humorous, nostalgic! Memories of the fire when she was just a little girl—the terrifying flames, the hopelessness of seeing her whole world destroyed, the discomfort of living in a tent while the new hotel was being built. Memories of going to Sunday school with the little Methodist children ("because I didn't want to be different"), of speaking pieces in Sunday school ("because I had taken elocution lessons"), and of Mrs. Wood scolding her for such unseemly behavior. Memories of the old pavilion where the children were bedded down on the benches, or on mattresses brought from home, while their parents danced the whole night through, with time out for a midnight supper at the Independence Hotel. "What did you serve?" I asked innocently, "Cake and coffee?" "Cake and coffee! We served a whole meal—everything!" No calorie counters then! I could picture the crowded diningroom, the tired but happy dancers, Mary Levy and the children rushing about, the Chinese cook busy in the kitchen.

And through Birdie's eyes I saw her pretty young mother when she first came to this raw and ugly pioneer town, fresh from the amenities of San Francisco. Life was hard here—running a hotel in those days was sheer drudgery for a city girl. And there were the eight children—no real home for them, just the hotel. One son died as a small child, one drowned in the Owens River (Joseph Levy, July 1, 1900, 17 years. Ever Remembered). Mary Levy carried that sorrow to her grave.

She was a rabbi's daughter, said Birdie, "and it made her sad to see her children neglect her faith. On Holy Days Mama would go into a vacant room of the hotel and read the services from the prayer book. She took the part of both rabbi and worshipper. When she came to the words, 'The congregation will please rise,' she stood up, and when she read, 'The congregation will please be seated,' she sat down on her prayer stool. But none of us worshipped with her."

Edith Brierly, being the youngest of Mary Levy's eight children, remembers her mother after she had lived many years in Independence—still a gentle, lovely woman, still an exile. She had been able to visit San Francisco often after the children were older, but it was never the same—she was caught between two worlds. Although she worshipped alone, she never neglected her religious duties. "On Friday evenings she always lighted the candle and said a prayer, and on Saturdays she wouldn't even write. When the Saturday paper came one of us children had to tear off the wrapper, for that was work and she wouldn't do any work on the Sabbath."

But, although Mary Levy grieved that her children had fallen away from the faith, perhaps she labored better than she knew. Said Edith, "I have Mama's prayer book and on the anniversary

of her death I light a candle and say the prayer for the dead." She handed me the slender volume, the place marked by a faded red rose. "I remember thee in this solemn hour, most beloved Mother. I remember the days when thou didst still dwell on earth and thy tender love watched over me like a guardian angel. Thou hast gone from me, but the bond which unites our souls can never be severed. Thy image truly lives within my heart. May the merciful Father reward thee for the faithful kindnesses thou hast ever shown me. May He lift up the light of His countenance upon thee and grant thee eternal peace. Amen."



INDEPENDENCE HOTEL