

The Heilner Brothers from Urspringen

Dedicated to Claire and Gene Freedman

The Heilner brothers came from the family of Aron Heilner, a teacher at the Jewish school in Urspringen. Aron Heilner (1804–1891), the son of butcher Mayer David Heilner and his wife Recha from Sulzdorf, had left his parents' home after attending the Jewish school for eight years, and he was later active as a Jewish private tutor, partly in Fassoldshof in Upper Franconia (1821–1823) and until 1829 in Unterleinach in Lower Franconia. In 1829 he graduated from the Jewish seminar in Würzburg and was given a post as head of the newly-built school in Urspringen. In Fassoldshof Aron had met his later wife, Madel (Simon) Hirsch (1798–1836), daughter of the soapmaker and trader Simon Hirsch from Nordheim vor der Rhön. Madel had arrived in Fassoldshof as the servant girl of the family of trader Joseph Lion (Leon), who went on to adopt her.

Madel was Aron's great love. In 1823 her son Seligmann was born. Because of their financial situation, marriage was only possible later on, when Aron was given the teaching post. On November 9, 1830 the wedding took place and the teacher and his family moved into the modest little schoolhouse in Urspringen. Four more children were born here: one who died at birth (1833), two girls, Regina (1832–1908) and Carolina (1836–1912), and a boy Sig(is)mund (1834–1917). In 1837, one year after Madel Heilner's death, Aron married Nanni Salin (1809–1877) from Thüngen. This union produced four children: Bernhard Baruch (1841–1842) who died very early on, daughter Sophie (1850–1930), and Max (1838–1903) and David (1845–1925). In 1854 Aron – who only just managed to keep his family going with his small teacher's salary and small business dealings – realized that there was not much of a future in Bavaria for young Jewish people. From the 1830s onward, numerous Jews had decided to emigrate to the US, e.g. members of the Adler, Fränkel, Freudenreich, Klein, Mosenfelder, Schloss, Trepp, Waldauer and Wormser families from Urspringen, but also many from the Heilner family including Aron's nephew Lehmann Heilner (born 1808), who had worked as a private tutor in Remlingen and taken over Aron's post in Unterleinach in 1829. In July 1845, Aron Heilner's eldest son Seligmann emigrated to the USA. He first went to New York, where the previously-mentioned Lehmann Heilner worked as a choirmaster, and then seems to have gone to stay with relatives in Cincinnati. A series of business failures caused him to go to California, where gold was discovered in 1848. By 1853 at the latest, Seligmann was running a clothing and textiles business named E.D. Cohen in Crescent City, a harbour town in Northern California, supplying the prospectors at a nearby dig. Seligmann's success, and the continuing difficult situation in Bavaria, also prompted Sigmund Heilner to emigrate at the beginning of June 1853. He was 19 at the time and had studied textile trading. For Sigmund, too, Lehman Heilner's family in New York were the first port of call.

From there he moved to Baltimore, and probably to Washington after 1853. In 1854 Sigmund followed his brother Seligmann to Northern California, and in January 1855 the brothers met again in San Francisco. Together they travelled to Crescent City and then further north a few months later, to the prospecting town on Althouse Creek in south-western Oregon, where a branch of their business was set up.

The spread of mining and the pressure to settle had an adverse effect on the living conditions of the Indians there, and in 1855 the Rogue River Indian War broke out. During the conflict, which lasted until 1856, Sigmund supplied the volunteers with weapons and ammunition. Even though mining at Althouse Creek had passed its heyday by that time, Seligmann was still successful in business. In 1856 and 1859 the brothers were able to afford a large contribution to the dowry of their sisters Regina (married Feifer Gutmann from Karbach in 1857) and Carolina (married Max Stiefel from Hochhausen in 1862). In the summer of 1860, having sold his business and safely invested the proceeds, Seligmann travelled back to Germany. From Urspringen, he announced the possibility of going back and founding a business in Germany, but this seemed rather unpromising in view of the global recession of 1857. It was also difficult for Seligmann – who like his brother had adopted US citizenship in 1859 at the latest – to become accustomed to the very different conditions in Germany. In April 1862 he returned to America. Between 1860 and 1862, Sigmund looked after his brother's business dealings, running a haulage company, trading in furs and lending money. He found relaxation in painting and poetry. He also grew very interested in quartz and copper mining, and eventually returned to the gold rush settlement in Althouse Creek to start the old business again.

The most important consequence of Seligmann's trip home was the creation of a family fund for joint projects in 1862, which was financed by money from America and administered by Aron Heilner. In May 1863 this fund contained 25,000 guilders, and 15,000 were transferred back to America to help new business start-ups.

Ten thousand guilders were used for Max and David Heilner and their "Heilner Brothers" linen wholesale business in Stuttgart, and further funds were used to finance the purchase of a new house in Karbach by the Gutmann family. In 1864 Aron Heilner ended his career as a teacher in Urspringen, moved to Stuttgart with his family and worked in his sons' business as a bookkeeper. The brother ran the linen business jointly from 1863 to 1896, and then David became the sole proprietor from 1897 onwards. In 1899 he devoted his attention to the newly-founded linoleum factory in Bietigheim, and under his management the "Germania Linoleum-Werke AG" became a successful enterprise. It formed the basis for the "Deutsche Linoleumwerke", founded in 1926 by David's son Richard Heilner (1876-1963). Dr. Richard Heilner had his company "arianized" by the Nazis, and was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942. Fortunately, he survived, and returned to Stuttgart.

Seligmann, who stayed mostly in California, returned to Oregon in 1863 when Sigmund sold the business in Browntown to invest completely in mining. They placed their hopes in the "Enterprise Quartz Company" and the "Heilner Quartz Mill" in Enterprise, to the north of Althouse Creek, but these were finally dashed in 1866. This was followed by many years of travel as they searched for some new means of income. In 1866/67 Sigmund was in Little Dalles in Washington, where he kept a store, and travelled through Washington and Montana as a peddler selling goods purchased in Portland. During this time he excelled as a landscape and portrait painter. Seligmann stayed in Enterprise initially, but then spent most of his time in Nevada. From 1868 onward Sigmund lived in California, mainly in Brooklyn, today a suburb of Oakland. The store there, in which Seligmann also worked from time to time, was destroyed in an earthquake and a fire in 1869. In 1870/71 Sigmund worked in Portland for the "Alaska Fur Company". In the summer of 1871 he visited his parents and family in Germany. He saw no future for himself in the brothers' firm and thus returned in early October to Portland, where Seligmann was also living. With 2,500 guilders start-up capital from the family fund, Seligmann and Sigmund moved to Sparta in the east of Oregon, a flourishing mining community on Eagle Creek. The two of them worked as traders here, too, and set up a store named "E.D. Cohn & Co". They were supported during these years and until 1877 by further payments from the family fund.

In Portland in June 1874, Sigmund married Clara Neuberger, born in 1854 in Hainstadt/Odenwald to Joseph Neuberger (1800–1876) and his wife Sara Sinsheimer (1826-1900). From Sparta, where their first child was born in April 1875, Sigmund and Clara moved to Baker City (1876), which had become a town in its own right in 1874 and quickly became the centre of a flourishing mining region. The town soon became home to Sigmund and his growing family (the Heilners had three more children). Together with Seligmann and other partners he opened a business there. Very soon, Sigmund also started buying up real estate in and around the town. In 1881 he founded the first bank, established the family home, worked from 1884 onwards for a haulage company ("Baker City Forwarding and Commission House"), and also variously as an insurance agent and fur and wool trader. He also owned several farmsteads and houses in the region, and in 1887, while extending a department store, he also founded a hotel. In Baker City Sigmund not only discovered the success he had longed for as a businessman – he was also deeply respected by his fellow citizens. From 1885 he was a member of the oldest Jewish association in Oregon, the "Congregation Beth Israel" in Portland (founded 1853). For a short while, once again without success, the two brothers invested in a gold-mine in Huntington and also in Sumpter. Sigmund now had a secure footing, but Seligmann continued to lead an unsettled existence. He became involved in a court-case as a witness, and was shot dead in the street outside his brother's store at 10 pm on October 29, 1886. Sigmund, supported in his business by his sons Jesse (born 1875)

and Sanford (born 1883), retired from professional life in 1909 and devoted his remaining years to his family and to painting. He died in Portland on September 7, 1917 at the age of 83, two years after his wife Clara. The business was continued by their youngest son Sanford and brothers Gerson and Berthold Neuberger, nephews of Clara Heilner. The Heilner department store, today "The Neuberger and Heilner Building", and the town district "Heilner's Addition", still commemorate a pioneer of Oregon and a successful emigrant family from Franconia and Bavaria.

Leonhard Scherg

I am grateful to Claire Freedman, granddaughter of Sigmund Heilner, and her husband for allowing me to relate the extraordinarily interesting story of the Heilner family. My main source was Sigmund Heilner's correspondence from 1853 to 1917. The collection is now owned by Brigham Young University, Salt Lake City, Utah.