

MY LIFE HISTORY

Jacob de Saurdistreud

Considering the fact that I have passed the Biblical allotment of three-score years and ten, it occurs to me that much has happened in the eighty-one years that have gone by. This chronology may be of interest to my children and their children.

I was born, one of a large family, to Herman and Rachel deSourdis Freund on April 3, 1873 in Barranquilla, Republic of Colombia, S. A. My father was born in Mitwitz, Bavaria, Germany on December 6, 1844, and my mother was born in Curacao, West Indies on November 7, 1853. They were married August 24, 1870. My father migrated to Cincinnati about 1867, where an uncle was domiciled as the father of eight children. His stay was short as another Uncle, Julius Hoenigsberger, wrote him to join forces in Barranquilla in the export and importing business. He then migrated with his family to Detroit, Michigan in 1880, while a part of the family left in 1879, of which I was one. My father had two brothers in Detroit and he joined forces in a department store called "The Fair." Father died on May 12, 1897, leaving a family of ten children. Mother died February 12, 1922.

In 1895 he journeyed to Germany for the first time since his departure and bought some machinery for the manufacture of small cement tile for residences. This business was conducted by an Uncle, Joseph Freund, and brother, Ignatz. They were short of funds and managed to interest Aaron Cohen of Pittsburgh, so the family moved there and opened a small factory which was only fairly successful.

When I was about twelve years old, I suffered from a stomach ailment which the Detroit doctors were unable to diagnose. The last one we consulted advised an ocean trip, claiming I had catarrh of the stomach, evidently a bit in the dark. My father was unable to take me to New York, so an Uncle put me on a Hamburg-American Liner. My father cabled his brother in Coberg to meet me in Hamburg. Fortunately, a friend also received a cable, so he met me as my Uncle claimed he had cut his hand and was unable to leave. I always felt he did not want to incur the expense. From Hamburg I journeyed to Meiningen, where Father's oldest sister lived. I remained there one week, then on to Coberg. A doctor was consulted who claimed I was o. k. Reporting to Father, he insisted that I consult a specialist. My Uncle took me to Wurzburg to see Prof. Leube who was then world renowned. At that time he had a large American practice. It took him about fifteen minutes to determine, what I have since felt, was an ulcer of the stomach. He had a private clinic in the top floor of the Hotel Zum Kronprinz as well as at the hospital. As usual Americans had the reputation of being millionaires. I remained in the hotel for four weeks under nursing Nuns. The treatment was linseed oil poultices during the day and cold compresses at night for ten days with a light diet, which was increased the next twenty days. I emerged cured and went back to Coberg. By the way, there was never a recurrence of the trouble.

In Coberg I was sent to the "Real Schule," approximately equivalent to our high schools. The first day I was sitting in the hall awaiting a class when a man passed by, returned and said, "When a professor passes a student, he is required to stand in respect." I told him I was an American and unacquainted with their customs. With that, he slapped my face and threw me to the floor. I never went back. But I have always contended it displayed the brutal German.

My nine months' stay was most unhappy, excepting three months I spent with a cousin of Mothers, Mrs. Abraham Wolff, who lived in the finest residential section of Frankfurt, namely, Schwind Strasse. They had two sons and two daughters. The household included a German tutor for the boys and an English governess for the girls. Mr. Wolff had accumulated a fortune as a banker in Columbia, but revolutions, which so often occur in those Latin countries, caused him to lose this fortune. The older son committed suicide, the other died a natural death. The two daughters married and remained in Germany. Mr. Wolff died and Tia Teresita moved to New York, where she married an old friend. My stay in Frankfurt was most pleasant. The older boy played the violin, the other the flute and one daughter, the cello. The mother was a splendid pianist and had a grand Steinway.

My oldest sister, Rosita, was educated at Lausanne, Switzerland and had an almost terrible experience. She was traveling to Frankfurt for a visit when she was arrested as a Russian spy. Fortunately, Mr. Wolff, Consul for Columbia, was able to have her released.

Upon my return to Detroit in 1886, I became "Maitre d'Hotel" for our large family, consisting at that time of eight brothers and sisters, my parents, grandmother, a cook, a maid and English coachman at about \$15.00 per month. We had three horses, a cow, a surrey "with the fringe on top," a garden buggy and a Brewster two-seater with a black body and red wheels. The horses consisted of a team of sorrels and a race horse which an uncle gave us. My oldest brother and I had wonderful drives, taking our girls out. The race horse afforded us great sport as we always managed to get a race on the Grosse Point Road on Sundays. We had an unfortunate experience with this mare. It seems that my Uncle, who was a director in the Detroit Driving Club, had kept this mare in their stable and without knowledge, it seems that she was in foal by Directum, a great stallion in those days. Without experience in such matters, we did not watch her sufficiently and one morning in entering her stall found her trying to break the bag and the two offspring were suffocated. They were the image of their sire, black as coal, and would have been most valuable had they survived.

In those days there were no washing machines, dish washers, electric irons, vacuum cleaners, electric refrigerators and, lastly, no birth control. I pitched in and took charge of marketing for the family. On Saturdays I would drive to an open market and buy sufficient food for the following week. This included a fore quarter of beef at six cents a pound and on alternating weeks a hind quarter for eight cents. We had a double door refrigerator and it was my duty to cut up the beef in steaks, roasts, etc. In those days a bushel of potatoes cost fifteen cents, the same for apples, and everything else was correspondingly low. For the Winter we stored thirty bushels of potatoes, thirty bushels of apples, and a hog's head of sauerkraut. I recall that even with fourteen people to feed, as well as the horses and cow, the cost of maintaining such a menage was approximately twenty per cent of our present cost.

We children received German instruction weekly, and my Father always spoke Spanish to us. In high school I played first violin in the orchestra and at the age of fourteen, played the "Il Trovatore" Overture before fifteen hundred guests.

Now I continue with my story. Graduated from Detroit High School in 1893 and entered Cornell University in the Fall of that year, was graduated in June, 1897, with the degree of M. E. E. E. Arriving in Detroit during a panic year, I managed to get a job at detailing a button fastening machine for steel clips on men's shoes. The detailing of approximately 350 parts required three months' work, after which I became footlose. My weekly salary was \$7.50 for ten hours a day and six days a week. For three months I was jobless and, finally, my oldest sister, Rosita Hoenigsberger, interested an engineering friend on my behalf. I arrived in New York in January, 1898. Conditions in business were still bad, so the best I could do was a job as timekeeper at the car barns of the Metropolitan St. Railways on 34th and Park Avenue. My remuneration was \$1.50 per day, enough to pay my board.

Seeking an engineering job, I found an opening with the same company that was building the 96th and East River Power House. I reported to the Engineer in charge, whose name was Van Orden. It so happened that a cousin of his had graduated from Cornell in 1896 and as he lived in the same house I did, it helped in the introduction. The job meant the use of level and transit as used by Civil Engineers. I confessed that these instruments were strangers to me, but Van Orden kindly instructed me on their usage. This helped me in my advancement.

Inside of two months I was advised that the Metropolitan was constructing an underground contact system for the operation of electric street cars on South Broadway, a new venture. I reported to the Engineer

in charge, a Mr. Uhlenhaut who, by the way, became Chief Engineer of Pittsburgh Railways several years later. My advancement to \$65.00 per month was enormous. My job was taking elevations across the street with the level. In those days the heavy horse-driven trucks were as thick as autotrucks are today, which meant extra caution in the operation.

About two months later, Mr. Uhlenhaut called me to his office stating the main office required an Engineer to construct a compressed air plant at 14th and 11th Avenue, opposite the Erie Ferry. Asking whether I could handle the job, I appeared very wise, although it was a venture-some job, entirely foreign to my experience. I became a Prince at \$125.00 per month to attack a stupendous undertaking. When I arrived on the scene, the building of structural steel was in place. In checking the two boiler foundations, I found it necessary to reconstruct them, although the Engineer whom I followed was an old employee of about sixty-five years.

This plant was something never previously attempted in the Engineering world. Owing to the fact that the soil on the 28th and 29th Street lines was under water, the under contact system used throughout the City was impossible. Two engineers had invented a system whereby the street cars were to be operated by compressed air. It was my job to erect a four-stage compressor in the building. This compressed air to 3,000 lbs. per sq. inch. The air was stored in Mansman (German) Tubes under seats of street cars. Air for engines was reduced to 60 lbs. Owing to the sudden reduction, the air froze and the system proved a failure. This venture cost the company \$500,000.00.

With the failure mentioned, I was without work. I then became Asst. Engineer to Geo. T. Hanchett, who undertook to develop a safety third rail system invented by Mike Murphy. The company, Murphy Safety Third Rail Company, obtained a contract from the B. & O. R. R. to install the system through the tunnel between Mt. Royal and Camden Stations in Baltimore. I was placed in charge of this installation and moved to Baltimore in January, 1901. The idea involved was the use of solenoid switches which actuated sections of third rail through the current generated from the electric engine. Unfortunately, the contact arm failed to drop every time, due to a saturated condition of the solenoid coil, and the system was declared a failure. While my salary was \$125.00 per month, when the company defaulted, they owed me \$175.00, including salary and expenses, a great loss to me as enumerated in what follows.

When I arrived in Baltimore in January, 1901, I remembered that I became acquainted during my first year at Cornell with Lillian A. Myers. We both played the violin, a medium of our meeting. Unfortunately, I did not at this time know how her name was spelled.

I consulted the telephone directory and found that a Meyers family lived on Eutaw Place. Upon calling, I was told Lillian Myers lived two doors above. I called and was told that Lillian was confined in Far Rockaway, Long Island, with an injured knee cap through a fall from a bycycle. Fortunately, Mrs. Myers had heard of me and I accepted a dinner invitation.

Shortly after that, Mr. Murphy came to Baltimore to investigate a prospective electric route in the country. Upon arriving at the site, we found two horses for our investigation. One of the horses was a thoroughbred Kentucky, which I was allowed to mount. After a fifteen-mile ride, I returned to my boarding house and the next day, a Thursday, I had an appendicitis attack. Previous to that time, I had several other attacks and my doctor in New York (Dr. Honan) had advised me that the next attack would entail an operation. I managed to take a train ride on Saturday to see my doctor, who ordered me to report to Hahnemann Hospital the following Monday. The operation was performed the following Saturday. In ten days I was out of bed and in another week was allowed to go back to Baltimore. A call at the Myers home found that Lillian had returned home. After a short courtship, we became engaged. During the Summer, Mr. Myers died and the wedding was postponed to the following March 17, 1902. After that Mrs. Myers and daughter, Flora, went to Italy where another daughter, Carrie, married an Italian, Amino Castaldi, from Milan. While the noon wedding was very small, it was an elaborate affair.

We journeyed to Philadelphia that afternoon, and then to Atlantic City on our honeymoon. Our stay was short as I was called back to Baltimore. Louise, our first born, arrived the following December. In January, I was jobless, which meant that no time could be lost to get employment and find support for my family. It so happened that the General Electric Manager for Electric Road had visited our installation and told me to get in touch with him when necessary. A letter brought a telegram to come to Schenectady. Their offer was not acceptable as it would mean starting as a draughtsman for \$25.00 per week, not sufficiently promising for my family. During the installation of the rail system, I had a Negro laborer working for me. I recall a story about him that is worth repeating. One day I gave him a live wire, causing a bad short circuit, and he nearly collapsed. He claimed "I was firstest electrician in Maryland."

Upon my return to New York, I called on an employment agency who reported that the Union Switch & Signal Company (now Westinghouse Airbrake Company) required an Electrical Engineer. I immediately sent them my credentials and I received a wire (which I still have) asking me to report at Swissvale. I was made Assistant Electrical Engineer to a very clever inventor named Thullen. He was the

inventor of a signalling system for the New York Subway, then just started. While signalling had been used for many years on steam railroads, the use of direct current would not answer on an electric road. The answer was the use of alternating current. I assisted in the design and detailing of the system and also installed and tested the system on the Pittsburgh Railway Line on Brown's Hill at this end of the Homestead Bridge. It proved very satisfactory and the installation was made throughout the New York Subway. ✓

I arrived in Wilksburg in February, 1903 and rented a room there. After I was certain that my new position was assured, I brought the family to Pittsburgh after two or three months. We rented a nice furnished home on Walnut Street, awaiting completion of a new house in Edgewood.

In 1905, after two years with the Union Switch Company, I found it necessary to resign my position although I was offered a 33-1/3% increase in my \$125.00 per month salary. My reason for leaving was due to the fact that the American Cement Tile Company had been incorporated and moved to Pittsburgh in January of 1902. I interested my brother-in-law, I. L. Myers, to provide necessary funds to start a plant at Wampum, Pennsylvania. Those actively engaged in the business were an Uncle and one brother. They discontinued the manufacture of small residence roof tile and started the original large red roof slab with an interlocking side. They were able to make progress by closing a large contract with the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company at Ford City, Pennsylvania. When my one brother moved to Chicago, where the older brother had married and started a tile company of his own, it was decided that I should take charge of the business and I moved the family to Beaver, Pennsylvania, in early 1905.

Shortly after that, the Panama Canal had been started and through the firm of McClintock-Marshall Company, who had a contract to build the steel gates for the various locks on the Canal, I learned of the construction contemplated and of the many shop buildings to be erected on the Pacific end of the Canal. I went to Washington and then to the Canal where I interested the Panama Canal Commission and I closed a contract for the manufacture of all the roof slabs required on the site. A plant was started and we not only completed the original contract, but obtained a second one. My contact was principally with Admiral Rousseau, one of the commission members. All in all I made five trips to Panama, finally concluding operations. I became thoroughly acquainted with the members of the commission, including Gen. Geothals, the Head, and Gen. Gorgas, who cleaned up the Yellow Fever through the obliteration of mosquitos.

In the manufacture of these large roof slabs, we used expanded metal to reinforce them, the only available material at hand. Unfortunately, after some twenty years or more, we found that under certain bad conditions of moisture, gases, etc., the slabs deteriorated and failed. Shortly, after we substituted a galvanized wire mesh which overcame the trouble. Among the principal failures was a report from Washington that we would have to make good on the work done at Balboa. This was a threatening blow to the business. I was advised by the Government legal authorities that we had included a clause in our contract that the roof slabs "should last an indefinite period." Fortunately, they failed to construe this passage correctly as I had inserted the word "should" before that, in other words, "that the roof slabs should last an indefinite period." This one word was a lifesaver and I was able to convince them that we were not committed in any way and the matter was dropped. Inasmuch as our contract was taken at a ridiculous price, due to production assistance they gave us, they had ample service received.

The American Cement Tile Company progressed very satisfactorily providing ample returns to the stockholders, all in the family. In 1930, the Federal Cement Tile Company of Chicago, my brother's company, made us a very satisfactory offer for our business and we sold out. We received ample cash and bonds. Due to a depression in business a few years later, Federal failed to meet their obligations and asked us to take a 50% reduction in our bonds. Mr. Myers approved the idea, but I refused, feeling that it would eventually work out. My brother's father-in-law was considered an excellent businessman, but I learned that he was very shrewd and I was adamant. We finally received payment of all our bonds after cancellation of over \$100,000.00 in overdue interest.

At the time we owned a Paint Plant, Lastik Products Company, adjacent to the tile plant, which we operated successfully. It so happened that my daughter Jane married Donald Steinfirsh, who lost his job with the Coca Cola Company. I put him in charge of the Paint Plant.

In 1942 the Federal Cement Tile Company dissolved their business and for tax purposes took a considerable loss on several plants previously bought from us. I purchased the entire Wampum Plant at a very interesting figure. We reincorporated the Lastik business and resumed operations as a going concrete roof slab concern. This has proven successful as we were able to retain Federal's Eastern representative.

Donald remained as General Manager and after World War II, Jack Jr., who was not accepted by the various war services, became an expeditor of supplies for the Government. At the close of the War, he agreed to join forces with us, an excellent venture for him.

In January, 1942, one of my eyes was operated by Dr. Harvey Thorpe, for cataract. The same operation was performed on the other eye in January, 1943. Both of these operations were most successful, the result--20-15 vision with cataract glass. On September 14, 1951, I suffered a coronary occlusion. Fortunately, I received most excellent medical and nursing care and after some four or five months, recovered and have since been in fairly good health with minor skin troubles and urinary affliction.

As of this date, April, 1954, we are still conducting the business. Now, my story ends most abruptly with the passing of my beloved wife, who died November 23, 1953 at the age of 79. We had a wonderful companionship of some 52 years. She was honored and loved by the entire community through her great civic work. As a Mother, she left a great heritage with eight children, namely, three happily married daughters and one son. The oldest single member of the family, Louise, now devotes her life to my care.

J. deS. FREUND

As a further interesting history of my maternal grandparents, I append a copy of their marriage certificate. This original marriage certificate is still in the archives of one of the oldest synagogues in the Western Hemisphere. This I translated from the Spanish.

My grandfather was born in Bordeaux, France. We have ample proof that his ancestor (a portrait of whom we have in miniature) was a Spaniard who lived in his native land until the Spanish Inquisition, when all Jews were banished during the sixteenth century. His great friend at the time was Cardinal deSourdis, who smuggled him over the border into France, clad in Priestly garb. Out of gratitude he assumed the name of deSourdis. On parting, he presented this ancestor with a richly engraved gold snuff box, now in the possession of my sister-in-law, Mrs. I. H. Freund of Chicago.

My grandfather migrated to St. Thomas in what is now the Virgin Islands, an American possession. My grandmother who was born there was of Danish and Dutch descent. I have never been able to determine when grandfather died, but it must have been during my early childhood, because he did move to Barranquilla with his wife and two daughters. The portraits now hanging in the family dining room were painted in Paris by an artist named Vienot. My grandmother came to Detroit with the family and she practically raised Mother's ten children until her death in 1894. I remember her as a remarkable, sweet old lady, beloved by all who knew her.

FOR WELL SAID

The present serves to certify that in the afternoon of Thursday, being the third day of Ngomer and the twentieth day of Iyar, 5607, which corresponds to the third day of the month of May, 1847, were united in matrimony according to the laws of Mixen and Israel, Jacob Fernandez Dias deSourdis, son of Mardoques and Rebecca deSourdis ne Depas and Hannah, daughter of Jacob and Raquel de Castro ne Sasportas.

A similar certification has been confirmed for the celebrant in the book of registry of the congregation.

St. Thomas

20 of Iyar 5607

May the 6th 1847

M. N. Nathan

Minister of the Congregation.

Signatures of the celebrants. We do attest and certify the above.

J. F. D. deSourdis

Hannah deCastro

On April 25th, 1850

A. Wolff, President

J. Fidanque, Jr., Vice Pres.

J. H. Osoris, Secretary

Rebecca deSourdis was born.

On November 7, 1853

Rachel deSourdis was born.

We who subscribe have made the former transcription which is a true one of the original document and which we have delivered to conform with our understanding.

Barranquilla

Feb. 24, 1866

J. Senior

David deSola

Court of Justice of the province of Barranquilla, Feb. 24, 1866.
Received from Messrs. Senior and deSola the verified interpretation.

Luena

Loscana

Also signed by Hannah deCastro deSourdis.

On same date delivered to those interested.

Loscano