

The Sternbergers: Merchants and Manufacturers in the Carolinas

by Judith Hirschman Rivkin and Karen S. Franklin with Andrew Cuadrado

Historians and genealogists reconstruct family history through documentary evidence, artifacts, documents, stories, and memoirs left from generations before. The Sternberger family of South Carolina left an ample trail of “breadcrumbs” (perhaps parchment) to reconstruct a colorful tale.

We can imagine Jonas Sternberger, an itinerant teacher and a cantor like many in the early 19th century, arriving in Obrigheim in the Palatinate region of Germany to teach Hebrew and lead prayer services. He went on to have a long career as a teacher, but an important event happened in that town: he married a local girl, Bertha Emanuel.

In the early 1840s the couple settled in nearby Neuleiningen, where Jonas and Bertha raised their children. In all, the couple had four sons and three daughters. David, the eldest son, was the first to arrive in the United States, immigrating in 1867; the last of those who came were grandchildren of Jonas and Bertha, who fled Germany in the 1930s.

David settled in Florence, South Carolina, where he opened a mercantile store. In 1870 he returned to Germany to marry Francesca Mayer—a union likely arranged after he met the prominent Mayer family in Neuleiningen. Francesca’s father, Elias Mayer, had three wives and a grand total of 20 children over 40 years. Francesca was his 19th child, born when Elias was 65 years old.

In September 1873 David returned to Florence with Francesca. His brothers Emanuel and Hermann, 15 and 24 years old, respectively, came with them. As legend goes, sometime in 1878 Emanuel returned to Germany to visit his father, who gave him \$250 to start his own business. Emanuel opened a successful general merchandise store and began a cotton-buying enterprise in Clio, South Carolina. Hermann soon joined him in business. In 1898 Emanuel’s good friends and fellow



Left to right: Jonas Sternberger (b. 1809), Bertha Emanuel Sternberger (b. ca. 1808), and Elias Mayer. Charcoal drawings made from photographs by students at the Artists Union in New York. Gift of Judith Hirschman Rivkin. Special Collections, College of Charleston. Photos by Dana Sardet.

Jewish immigrants Moses H. and Cesar Cone invited the brothers to join them in Greensboro, North Carolina, where they founded Revolution Mills. By the 1930s the mill became the largest flannel producer in the world. Emanuel later helped establish a synagogue in Greensboro, which, in the mid-1940s, adopted the name Temple Emanuel, chosen partly to honor his contributions as a founding member.

The story of Hermann and Emanuel’s business success is well known. Little public attention has been given to the story of their brother David and his wife, Francesca, or their children, Joseph, Edwin, Dora, and Rosa.

Rosa was born on January 10, 1875. She attended



Left to right, back row: Dora Sternberger, Joseph Sternberger, Rosa Sternberger Hirschmann; front row: Francesca Mayer Sternberger, David Sternberger, Edwin Sternberger. Photo courtesy of Leah Read Barkowitz.

Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and first visited Charleston as a guest of classmate Rosa Hirschmann. On this visit Rosa Sternberger met Henry Hirschmann, whom she married on June 23, 1896. Together they had five sons and two daughters: Joseph Mordecai, Edgar Sternberger, Lionel Albert, Jerold David, Victor Robert, Leah Blanche, and Edith Teresa.

Rosa was an early, proactive, and avid supporter of women's rights. She felt that women should receive an education—secular and religious—equal to that of men. She taught classes of young women every Sunday on the porch of her home at 11 Montagu Street—producing a cadre who called themselves “Rosa’s Girls.” For nearly



David Sternberger with grandchildren Leah Blanche Hirschmann (left) and Joseph Mordecai Hirschmann, ca. 1901. Photo courtesy of Leah Read Barkowitz.

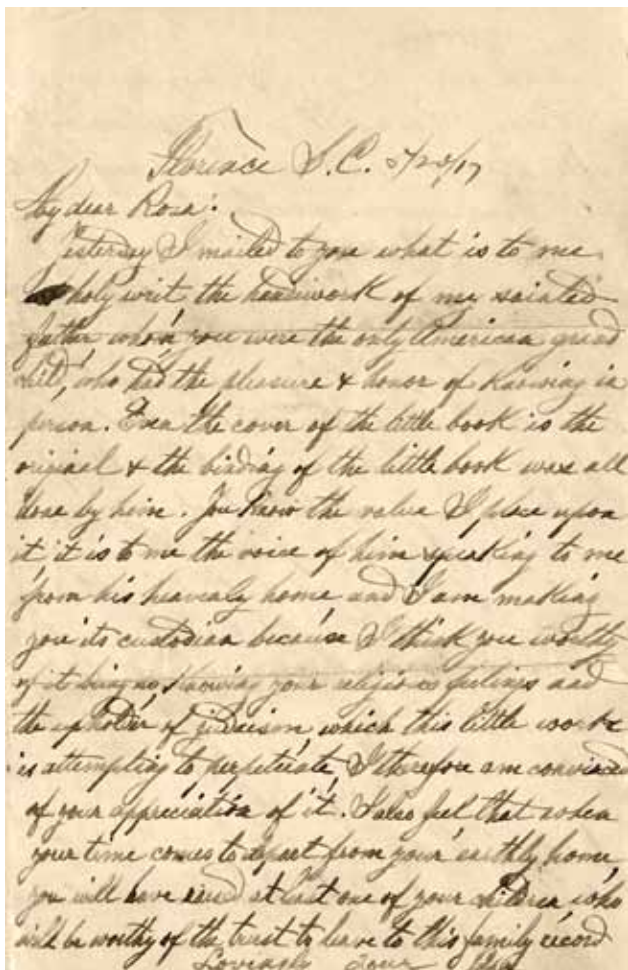


Rosa Sternberger Hirschmann. Photo courtesy of Leah Read Barkowitz.

30 years Rosa was superintendent of the religious school founded by Brith Sholom's Daughters of Israel. She served as president of the KKBE Sisterhood, the South Carolina Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the National Council of Jewish Women, local and state, and the Federation of Women's Clubs. She was also a Grand Matron in the Eastern Star.

The Sternberger name is known in the South for leadership and philanthropy. The story of Rosa, a community organizer and educator, is less well known. Inspired perhaps by the legacy of her grandfather Jonas, she became a role model for the next generation and the heir to his shofar, Hebrew primer, and mizrah.

Sources: “A Family History” by Jerold Hirschman (1980) and The Sternbergers: From Peddler to Patrician by Karen S. Franklin (2008).



Letter (left) to Rosa Hirschmann from her father, David Sternberger, dated 1917, in which he tells her that as an “upholder of Judaism,” she is to be the “custodian” of his father’s Hebrew primer, shown here with Jonas Sternberger’s shofar. Collection of Judith Hirschman Rivkin. Photos by James Ferry.

