

**The New York Public Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division**

**Straus Family
Papers 1810-1962**

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SUMMARY

Title: Straus Family Papers 1810-1962 (bulk dates 1870-1912)

Size: 9 linear feet (16 ABs, 4 1/2 ABs, 5 FBs)

Source: Gift of Macy's Department Store, 1992

Access: Unrestricted.

Description: Correspondence, scrapbooks, speeches, photographs, and other items concerning Oscar, Isidor, and Nathan Straus, their parents, Lazarus and Sara, and their sons and grandsons.

BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL NOTE

The Straus Family Papers document the lives and careers of the descendants of Lazarus Straus (1809-1898) and Sara Straus (1823-1876), who came to the United States from Otterberg, Germany, in the early 1850s with their four children, Isidor (1845-1912), Hermine (1846-1922), Nathan (1848-1931), and Oscar (1850-1926). The family settled in Talbotton, Georgia, where Lazarus opened a dry goods store.

In 1865, the Strauses relocated to New York City, and Isidor and Nathan joined their father in establishing L. Straus and Sons, a glass and chinaware store. Their successful management of a similar department in one of R. H. Macy's & Company's stores led to their becoming partners in that firm in 1888. By 1892 they were also partners in the Brooklyn retail company Abraham & Straus.

Isidor Straus's interest in tariff reform and related legislation led to his successful run for congress from New York's fifteenth district in 1893. He was also a founder and president of the Educational Alliance, an organization for newly-arrived immigrants living on New York's Lower East Side.

In April 1912, Isidor and his wife, the former Ida Blun, were among the passengers who lost their lives in the sinking of the *Titanic*. Isidor's refusal to board a lifeboat before any of the younger men and Ida's decision to remain with her husband were widely noted by the press and the general public for the courage and unselfishness they exemplified.

During the 1880s, Nathan Straus became increasingly interested in philanthropic work, and in 1890 established a system for pasteurizing milk and distributing it to poor families in New York City. A dedicated Zionist, he visited Palestine five times between 1904 and 1927, and contributed substantially to charities there.

Oscar Straus, an 1873 alumnus of Columbia University's law school, turned to politics in 1882, working for the re-election of William Grace as mayor of New York City, and participating in Grover Cleveland's presidential campaign in 1884. In 1887, Cleveland appointed him U. S. ambassador to Turkey, a post he held until 1900, and to which he was re-appointed by President Taft in 1909. Oscar Straus was Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of Commerce and Labor from 1906 to 1908 and an advisor to Woodrow Wilson during the first World War.

Isidor's sons, Jesse (1872-1936), Percy (1876-1944), and Herbert (1881-1933), worked for Macy's until retirement. A small amount of material in these papers pertains to them as well.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Straus Family Papers consist of personal and business correspondence, scrapbooks, photographs, and other items pertaining to Lazarus, Oscar, and Isidor Straus, and Isidor's sons and grandsons. Materials range from the 1810s to the 1970s, with the bulk originating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

PROVENANCE NOTE

Most of the papers seem to have belonged to Isidor Straus, who apparently kept many of his personal papers in his office at Macy's. After his unexpected death in 1912, the materials eventually were transferred to the store's in-house archives. Other items may have belonged to his sons, Jesse and Percy.

In the early 1990s, Macy's deaccessioned these papers and gave them to the New York Public Library.

RELATED MATERIALS

Researchers should note that the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library also has thirteen linear feet of the papers of Nathan Straus, chiefly documenting his philanthropic activities. A finding aid to the Nathan Straus Papers is available.

SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

Series 1. Genealogical and Family History Materials. Boxes 1-2. 0.6 linear feet.

Box 1 contains a chart of the descendants of Lazarus and Sara Straus, compiled in 1954, and a two-volume family history by Robert K. Straus, a grandson of Isidor Straus, written in the 1970s.

Box 2 contains various family papers: what appear to be financial records of Isaac Straus, Lazarus's father, from the 1810s through the 1850s; an obituary for Lazarus Straus; and scattered correspondence.

Series 2. Oscar and Isidor Straus. Boxes 3-14. 4 linear feet.

Of the twelve boxes in this series, only one, Box 3, contains materials that originally belonged to Oscar Straus. These include letters from contributors to his campaign for governor of New York, 1912; letters of condolence he received after the deaths of Isidor and Ida Straus; a copy of a letter from Henry Ward Beecher to Grover Cleveland, 1887, advocating Straus for U. S. ambassador to Turkey; and family correspondence, including Isidor's last letters to Oscar. (How these items became part of the Macy's archives is unclear.) There is also a copy of a biographical article on Oscar Straus that appeared in the *Jewish Tribune* in 1927, a year after his death.

The remaining eleven boxes in Series 2 are papers of Isidor Straus. Boxes 4 through 7 contain family and business correspondence (including four folders of letters from Oscar Straus, 1889-1912, in Box 4). Box 8 holds speeches and writings by Isidor Straus, 1894-1911, chiefly commencement addresses and talks before the boards of charitable organizations. In Box 9 are account books, memoranda books, pocket calendars, and other notebooks of Isidor Straus, 1887-1912, and undated.

Boxes 10 through 12 contain scrapbooks compiled by Isidor Straus: telegrams and letters congratulating him on his election to congress, 1894 (Box 10), obituaries and letters of condolence received after the death of Lazarus Straus, 1898 (Box 11), and newspaper and magazine articles that mention Isidor Straus, 1893-1901.

Boxes 13 and 14 contain posthumous material: in Box 13 are a short autobiography by Isidor Straus, privately published by his family in 1955; and an M.A. thesis on Straus's political career by Saul Viener of the University of West Virginia, 1947. Box 14 contains memorial tributes to Isidor and Ida Straus, and materials relating to the sinking of the *Titanic*, including clipped articles from 1953 and 1962.

Series 3. Sons of Isidor Straus. Boxes 15-17. One linear foot.

Series 3 consists of personal and business papers of Isidor Straus's three sons, Jesse (1872-1936), Percy (1876-1944), and Herbert (1881-1933). Box 15 contains several letters to Jesse from his father and his uncle Oscar, business correspondence, vouchers, and canceled checks, ca. 1903-1923, and scattered news clippings from the 1920s and 1930s. Box 16 holds a wide assortment of materials, including documents concerning Isidor Straus's estate and the powers of attorney shared among his sons; correspondence and letters of condolence received by them after the deaths of their parents; speeches by Percy Straus; and clippings on the deaths of Herbert and Percy; and a few items pertaining to Jesse's son Jack, and Percy's son Ralph. Box 17 contains a scrapbook compiled by Percy of telegrams sent to him following his parents' deaths.

Series 4. L. Straus & Sons, Inc. Box 18. .3 linear foot.

The contents of Box 18 concern the partnership formed by Lazarus Straus and his sons and son-in-law, and the operations of their business. Items include the articles of co-partnership, 1874 and 1912; legal and financial records on the importation of china, 1876-1898; lists of employees, dating approximately from the late 1870s to mid-1880s; and "journals;" that is, account books, also from the 1870s and 1880s.

Series 5. Photographs, Framed Documents, and Other Materials. Boxes 19-25. 2.3 linear feet.

Most of this series consists of photographs, many in frames, of Jack Straus and members of his family. These include pictures of a party for his mother, Irma, his son Ken's wedding, and the family home in Talbotton, Georgia (Box 19); Jack Straus at various public meetings and events, 1930-1945 and undated (Box 20); and formal portraits of family members (Box 21).

Boxes 22 through 24 contain a mixture of framed items--letters and clippings as well as photographs--that apparently hung in Jack Straus's office. Box 25 holds oversized items: a scrapbook of Jack Straus's stock certificates; a scrapbook commemorating his forty years at Macy's; and a memorial scroll for Isidor Straus from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

CONTAINER LIST

Box Contents

SERIES 1: GENEALOGICAL AND FAMILY HISTORY MATERIALS

- 1 Genealogical materials:
Family tree
Family history, by Robert K. Straus, 1973 & 1977
- 2 Early materials:
Isaac Straus: financial records, 1810-1850
Lazarus Straus, obituary (see also Box 11)
Correspondence of various family members, mostly ca. 1850s-1860s

SERIES 2: OSCAR AND ISIDOR STRAUS

- 3 Oscar Straus:
Correspondence re his gubernatorial campaign, 1912
Family & personal correspondence, 1887-1912
Article about Oscar Straus, 1927
- 4 Isidor Straus:
Family correspondence, 1859-1911
- 5 Business correspondence--letterbooks, Jan. 1888-Nov. 1894
- 6 "Private letters" (personal and business correspondence), Nov. 1894-Dec. 1896
- 7 Wedding announcement, 1871
General correspondence, 1864-1911
Clippings about IS, 1891-1912
Correspondence of Ida Straus, 1898-1901 (3 items)
Various items, 1836-1891, and undated
- 8 Articles and speeches, 1894-1911
- 9 Pocket calendars, financial records, etc., 1887-1912, and undated
- 10 Scrapbook of telegrams re IS's congressional campaign, 1894
- 11 Scrapbook of clippings re Lazarus Straus's death, compiled by IS, 1898
- 12 Scrapbook of clippings, 1893-1901
- 13 *Autobiography*. . .
"The Political Career of Isidor Straus" (1947 M.A. thesis)
- 14 Posthumous material:
Honors, tributes, etc., 1912
Titanic-related items
Clippings, 1953 & 1962

SERIES 3: SONS OF ISIDOR STRAUS

- 15 Jesse Straus:
 Correspondence & financial records
- 16 Jesse, Percy, Herbert Straus:
 Business correspondence
- 17 Percy Straus:
 Correspondence w/Isidor Straus, Jan.-Apr. 1912
 Telegrams and letters of condolence, 1912

SERIES 4: L. STRAUS & SONS, INC.

- 18 L. Straus & Sons, Inc.:
 Store-related correspondence;
 Lists of employees, etc., 1874-1894

SERIES 5: PHOTOGRAPHS, FRAMED DOCUMENTS, AND OTHER MATERIALS

- 19 Photos
- 20 Photos: Jack Straus
- 21 Photos
- 22 Framed documents, 1923-1951, and undated
- 23 Framed photographs, clippings, and other items from Jack Straus's office, 1940s-1950s
- 24 Oversized photographs and framed documents
- 25 Various oversized items:
 Jack Straus: scrapbook of stock certificates, 1980;
 Scrapbook commemorating JS's forty years at Macy's, prob. 1961;
 Isidor Straus: memorial scroll from Hebrew University, Jerusalem.