



The Life of Sigmund Seligsberger

1863 - 1949

“What a life it was for a Seligsberger”



Sigmund Seligsberger posing on a picture postcard to his brother Leon in Fürth, 1908
(photo: private)

The handwritten original of this autobiographical manuscript is at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio. We like to thank Mrs. Ruth White, Ph.D. for making available to us this touching testimony of a 19th century Franconian emigrant's meandering walk of life and the photos of her great-uncle Sigmund Seligsberger.

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I left Altenmuhr [a hamlet in Central Franconia, near Gunzenhausen] about July 10th, 1880 for my trip to the U.S.A. at the age of 16 ½ years to make them my future home having a 2nd class ticket on a steamer of the Hamburg American Line which left Hamburg on July 14th, 1880. I had my *Auswanderungspapiere* [emigration papers] which gave me the right to emigrate from the German Reich to the U.S.A. and to become a citizen of that country.

After my father and I started for the depot to take the train, I said “Father, I go back and kiss Mother goodbye again,” which I did. We reached the depot just about 3 minutes before the train arrived and father said to me: “Sigmund, I have spent the money to fix you out for the trip, bought your ticket etc., but if you do not want to go, now is the time to say yes or no.” My heart wanted to say no, but my pride and desire for America said yes and so I kissed my father goodbye and went on the train for Würzburg where my oldest brother Leon was employed as a salesman at Rosenthal’s department store.

Leon got on the train with me in Würzburg and rode with me for quite a distance. I forgot the name of the station where he left me. I will mention that I cried pretty near all the way from Altenmuhr to Würzburg, about a 3 hours ride, and I wished several times I had told my father I did not want to go as I realized more than ever before the undertaking before me, even if I had a brother Lee who was employed in Terre Haute, Indiana. He had emigrated several years before me and I was to go to him and he would help me to get a position.

I forgot the date I arrived in Hamburg but I think I had a couple of days before the steamer would leave. While at the hotel I foolishly had someone talk me into getting to New York just as well as a steerage passenger. He would give me the difference in money and I thought it would be fine as I would have so much more money when I get over there. I had, as well as I remember, about \$ 50 which my father gave me but to my sorrow I found out when I got on the steamer and went down in the steerage to my bunk how it did stink there and how we were fed after standing in line with our tin dishes and getting our food dished out to us. My heart went to my feet and I could not stand it. I went to a steward and told him my tale of woe. He said: “You have to stand it just like hundreds of others.”

The steamer was crowded and no more second class cabins were vacant but I kept after him until I made a bargain with him that I could sleep in one of the stewards’ rooms and I would get the same food as they but I had to pay him more money than I had received in exchange for my ticket. I never regretted that I did so, it was well worth the money.

We arrived on July 28th, 1880 in New York which was my mother’s birthday. We had an awful storm for about 6 hours. The waves came over the railings on top of the steamer, broke

some of them and everybody had to go downstairs. I shall never forget the storm as long as I live; besides I got very seasick and I never expected to arrive alive in New York, but I did.

I was to be met in New York where we landed by a Mr. Goodman who was a relative of the Wormsers who were relatives of mine on my mother's side. When I got on the dock someone called my name and he looked like a fine, flashily dressed young man. I was afraid to answer him as I had heard so much on the steamer how crooks will take immigrants in but finally I got enough courage to answer him and he said: "Why did you not answer?" I told him that I was afraid he was not the right man but after I talked to him a little while I had confidence in him and he said: "I get a customs' officer to go through your belongings." He knew the officer who told me to open up the trunk and valises. He looked in and marked the outside o.k. Then we got a *Droschke* [cab] and went to the Wormsers where I stayed for 2 days. They were very rich people and treated me fine. They put me on the right train in New York and wired Lee on what train I was so he could meet me on my arrival in Terre Haute. I had a sign pinned on my coat: "Please see that I get off at Terre Haute."

My brother Lee was at the depot to meet me and I was happy to be with him. In about 10 days he got me a job with Ben Rosenheim in Paris, Illinois, about 20 miles from Terre Haute. He had a ladies' furnishing store. My job was to sweep the store, wash the windows, open up the boxes of goods when they came in, check them off and mark them and such kind of work. We had 4 salesgirls at the store. I received my board and room at a hotel and 1 dollar a week to start with and within one year after I could talk some English. I was put in charge of the cashier's desk, kept books, had to make out weekly and monthly statements which had to be sent to Rosenheim's partner in business, a Mr. Herz in Terre Haute. That is where Lee was in charge of the office for about 15 years or longer until the time of Lee's death. This by the way happened in Germany while he was on a trip for his health.

I kept on working for Rosenheim for about 3 years and if I remember right, I was making board and room and \$ 8 finally per week. I wanted more money, but they said, they could not afford to pay more and I went to work for an uncle of Rosenheim who had a clothing store in Paris. He paid me \$ 10 per week and boarded me at his home. Because I slept in the store my health became impaired and an old-fashioned German doctor (not the Hitler kind) kept telling me to quit store life and do outdoor work if I wanted my health back and become robust.

At the same time I have been reading cheap novels about the Texas cowboys and I got the notion in my head I am going to Texas. A short time after there was a very cheap railroad exemption for anywhere in Kansas, \$ 10 for a round trip ticket from Paris, Illinois. After talk-

ing things over with Lee who tried to talk me out of it but gave in, in the end my mind was made up to take in the exemption.

I hated to leave Mr. Hamburger who I worked for at the time as they were so good to me like a father and mother but he saw me packing up some things in my trunk and he said: “What are you doing?” I told him my plan. He and his wife tried to talk me out of it but it was no use and so I started in June 1885, I think, for the West.

Knowing not where I was going to stop, it happened that Mr. and Mrs. Hamburger were on the same train. Mr. Hamburger came to me and said his wife wants me to come in her car and I went. She again with tears tried to change my mind but no use, so she handed me a \$ 10 bill and wished me good luck and they left the train at the next station. I got to thinking where I would get off and I said, “well, I get my money’s worth,” and went to the last station my ticket would take me. That was Coffeyville, Kansas, just about 120 miles from the Indian territory.



I got off, looked up a hotel, registered and stayed there for a few days. I found out that a Mr. Powell had a farm and cattle ranch about 10 miles from Coffeyville and that he came from Paris, Illinois. So I went out to his place and asked for a job to work. He laughed and said: “What do you know about farming and cattle?” I said “nothing,” but I was willing to learn. He said: “Alright.” Next day I started to work. I stayed 3 months. The work did not suit me and I

made an agreement with the other 2 hired men if one quits we all quit. One man got fired and we 2 others quit. Powell said to me: "You better go back to Hamburger in Paris, you will never make a farmer." I guess he was right, I never did, but we 3 started for Texas and expected we would stay together. But when our money was about gone we had to separate anyhow and each had to look out for himself.

I took a job as a section hand on a railroad in Texas, kept it for a month to get a little money in my pocket and quit saying "Panhandle" for me where the big cattle ranches were. When I say big cattle ranches, I mean companies which handled from 6 to 8,000 calves a year. Mr. Powell knew a Mr. Goodnight, the cattle king of Texas, and gave me a letter of introduction to him and so I went to the end of the railroad to a town named Wichita Falls. It was about 130 miles from there to go up to the Panhandle, no railroad nearer than this.

In Wichita Falls I found out that they freighted all the supplies for the Panhandle with ox or mule team. Up there I met a nice man by the name of Baker who hauled freight for the Sloesser ranch. The manager's name was Dyer and he told me: "Kid, come with me, Dyer will give you a job." In those days were no idle men and jobs could be gotten anywhere and I went with him. He had 3 wagons with supplies for the ranch and 12 or 14 mules hitched to the wagons. It took us about 8 to 10 days. What a life it was for a Seligsberger but I got used to it. When we arrived there, Dyer who just had been married, said: "What can you do?" I said: "Anything." He said: "I want a cook for my house." I told him: "I do not know how to cook." He said: "You could learn." I said o.k. and so I went to cooking and I learned pretty quick, I think. I received \$ 40 per month and board and room. We had about 20 to 30 cowboys and a bunkhouse. That is a house where we all slept. Each had a fine blanket, a tarpaulin and a flour sack where we kept our underclothes as a pillow and our bed was made on the floor. Later on I bought myself a hair mattress and it was o.k. then.

Well, I stayed about 2 years, I think. I saw there was a good chance to sell cloth hats to the cowboys on our ranch and other ranches and I went to Fort Worth, Texas, and bought about \$ 300 stock. The bookkeeper of the ranch went in with me and sold them to the boys. Later on we bought a vacant house close to the ranch and used it for a store house, but all the time I kept on cooking.

While on my trip to Fort Worth I stopped at Vernon, Wilbarger County, and made application for my citizen paper and after this I could vote, sat on juries, convicted and freed men. Well, I see I have to cut out a lot of details or I shall be writing for weeks and weeks.

In 1887 I changed to work for another cattle ranch. Finch, Lord and Nelson were the owners. About this time they were building a railroad from Wichita Falls, Texas, to Kiowa, Kansas,

about 3 to 400 miles long. Our Mr. Nelson had inside knowledge to which towns the rails were laid out and one day he told me: "Sig, if you take up a section of land, 640 acres such and such plus it will make you some money." The land was sold by the State of Texas to settlers at \$ 2 per acre and given 40 years to pay for it. I took up a section and according to law I had to live on it for 30 days when I filed on it. I slept on the place 1 night every 6 months. I had a home built with 1 room to comply with the law. The lumber was hauled 100 or more miles and for quite a while I even had to haul my water 6 miles in a barrel and I kept on cooking.

One day I received a note that someone jumped my claim. Of course I went right up to it about 60 miles from where I worked and convinced the jumper he cannot hold it as I complied with the law and proofed it to him and he left it peacefully.

I returned to my cooking job but 3 months later someone else jumped my claim. He got off easy.

By and by the railroad kept on building. Counties were organized, county seats were established and my land was adjoining to Panhandle City, the county seat of Carson County. Of course that made the land more valuable and again it was jumped and I had a hard time to get the man off, come near having a shooting scrap but we did not. After I got possession of it again I said to myself "I stay on it until I sell my equity", which I did. I made about \$ 500 profit on the same.

Soon after this I got wandering fever, went to Colorado, Wyoming, worked at cooking most of the time. Then I went to Kansas again. In 1893, I think, I bought a span of horses, borrowed a wagon and went out in the country peddling groceries to the farmers, taking in chicken, butter and eggs and shipped them to Kansas City to a commission house. I made money for a while until eggs went down to 5 cents a dozen, butter to 10 cents per pound and chicken to 20 to 26 cents a piece and I could not make any money. I sold my horses and went to sell different new styles of cooking utensils which came out and I worked small cities and made money on it.

About this time the World's Fair came on and Lee went to Germany on a visit. On his return he came to Chicago and I said: "I take in the Fair in Chicago and see Lee." Well, a strange thing happened: I arrived in Chicago, met Lee and he told me how my dear parents would enjoy a visit from me. I got terribly homesick and the next day I left Chicago for New York for Germany. I had no kind of papers to show my citizenship which I left with other belongings in Kansas. I arrived in Altenmuhr and had a good visit and as my dear parents moved to Fürth to live there about that time, I looked after the packing etc.

In about 3 months I started back for Kansas and there I met a German druggist who told me how to make several preparations, one liniment, an electric inhaler for headaches, a face preparation and several others. Well, I went into business, had my own label printed, bought some bottles and ingredients to make the stuff and I started out traveling, took in small towns and sold from home to home. After I finished a town I would go to a schoolteacher, a minister, a druggist or anyone else. Selling them the secret of making the stuff would get me all the way from \$ 15 to \$ 40 for that and I made another town.

I sold my preparations for 25 to 50 cents per bottle. Most of them would cost me 7 to 8 cents except for the liniment which cost me about 14 cents and so I traveled through Kansas, Texas, Louisiana and Alabama. Then some law was passed that prohibited me from selling preparations.

In Montgomery, Alabama, I quitted the business and got a job as stockman in a large engross business. Then the Spanish American War broke out and the government called for volunteers to serve in the army and navy and I enlisted in the artillery. I found out that this organization would not be sent to Cuba so I got my release and joined the 5th United States Volunteers. We in the southern states were supposed to be more suited for Cuban climate and more yellow fever proof and so in July, I think, we sailed to Cuba. By the time we got there the war was won by the U.S. and we were left there to police the island until such time when we turned the island over to the Cubans. I was made Corporal after being in the army for 3 months. In 3 months longer I was made a sergeant and in 1899 we were ordered to go back to the U.S.A. and mustered out.

I was always on special duty in the quartermaster department. One day the colonel of the regiment sent for me and said: "Sergeant, you have been a good soldier and noncommissioned officer. I have been ordered to muster this regiment out and I shall go to the Philippines and I would be glad to have you to go with me. I will make an officer out of you over there." I came to attention, saluted the colonel and said: "I thank you for the honor but my calling is not to be in the army and I ask the favor to be mustered out on the island and I expect to stay here." He granted my wish.

The next day the quartermaster came to me and said: "Seligsberger, I would like you to stay here and keep the same position you had as a soldier, only you will be a civilian employee and receive \$ 75 per month and board and room." I said "I will think it over", and the next day I took the job. I had charge of all government's equipments and I stayed until May 1903 when the government turned the island over to the Cubans. I was one of the parties who held a silver platter to let the American flag down and raise the Cuban flag.

I stayed in Cuba about 2 to 3 months after it. As 3 of us bought a lot of government property that was auctioned off like 3 to 4 hundred bedsteads, pillows, a lot of stoves, lamps and lots of other articles, we opened up a big store.

After about 6 months I returned to the U.S. and went to San Francisco with the intention of sailing from there to the Philippines to work for the U.S. Government. After meeting returning employees who told me to stay away, I remained but had a very sad experience the 1st night being in San Francisco: Naturally I liked to be amidst soldiers. Some showed me the nightlife. They gave me knockout drops in steam beer, robbed me of all money except \$ 0.50 and a beautiful cane made from the backbone of a fish. A policeman found me laid out on some street. He heard my story. I went to my hotel, rested up for a day and then looked around for a job.

I took any kind of a job. I took up a claim for gold near Emigrant Gap, found out that I was on somebody else's ground, quit after 3 weeks and cooked for a mining camp. This happened during the 1906 earthquake of San Francisco. I worked for a surveyor's group in the country around Fort Bragg. While working later in Orville, I bought a square piano and sold it for a very good profit. So I went to Sacramento, got a job in a piano store without knowing a note, changed to another firm, A.J. Palmer, and finally to Santa Rosa. In Sacramento I met the manager of a music store in Petaluma and in Santa Rosa and he gave me the job in the latter town.

Business in Petaluma was very quiet so they sent me out with horse and wagon to sell talking machines to the farmers round there. I did nice business and met Mrs. Varent who ran a stationary store in partnership with the aforementioned music store. Hattie was a lovely widow, born in January 1863. We got married January 1, 1912 in Santa Rosa, about 2 years after I came to Petaluma.

My stepson Arthur went to Europe to study music and we followed him on our honeymoon trip. We stayed in Sweden, France, England, Holland, Germany, Italy and Switzerland for 14 months.

As we had sold the store, we made our home in San Francisco but moved to Oakland in 1914. I went into life insurance business. Following a precedent established years back by a geological survey company in Wyoming, Hattie used to call me Bismarck. Even letters addressed in this way were forwarded to me.

Hattie died April 12, 1924 and is buried in the Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland.



Sigmund in Fürth with his nephews Ludwig (left) and Philip and his sister-in-law Centa, probably in 1925 on the day of his brother Leon's funeral
(photo: private)

I went to Germany in 1925 for about 3 to 4 months. After a reunion with my sister in Bad Kissingen my oldest brother who had accompanied me there died suddenly in Fürth a few days after his return. I and my sister Sophie hurried to his funeral.



Sigmund Seligsberger in his later years
(photo: private)

I remarried on March 28, 1932 at San Jose, California. My wife Ida Augustine, a widow without children, born in Manchester, England, in 1875 got sick a few years after and died June 1st, 1940 and is buried at the Evergreen Cemetery.

My sister-in-law's sister, Mrs. Palmire Sternthal from Chicago, kept home for me since 1937. The widow of my brother Lee, Mrs. Adele (Mannberger) Seligsberger came from Terre Haute in 1941 to live with us [added by another hand: died 1948].

My residence was on 32nd Street until September 1937 when I moved to 4146 Emerald Street. There my nephew Ludwig Seligsberger came to see us in June 1947 and I dictated the last pages of my biography to him.

edited by Gerhard Jochem

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