

Sarah Piza
Joshua Piza's 7th child

1829-1907

One of the more successful of the younger business men of St. Thomas was Herman Meyer who had come there from Hamburg and was prominent as an importer. A prosperous bachelor of twenty-seven, he was considered by mothers a particularly desirable catch for their daughters.

Hannah Piza was as usual busy in her store one morning, when a woman friend came in – possibly to buy something, but surely to gossip. The talk ran on a ball that had taken place the night before. The lady simpered and looked mysterious, but finally confessed that Mr. Meyer had been so attentive to her daughter at the affair that she was sure they were engaged. Of course the hopeful mother was in high glee. Having told her story, she bustled out to spread it further.

The next visitor to the shop was Herman Meyer himself. The successful young merchant was a good friend of the energetic shopkeeper, and was in the habit of dropping in frequently to chat with her. They talked of this and that – of ships due and reports of hurricane, of news of the war between Mexico and the United States. Then Hannah told him of the rumor she had heard

of his engagement; and she asked if she might congratulate him. The young Hamburger's face was a study:

"Mrs. Piza", he said earnestly, "when I am engaged you will be the first to know it!"

It was only a short time after that he proposed to Sarah Piza, tall and pretty. He had seen her first a couple of years before at the wedding of his friend Jack Lindo to her sister Bienvanida. Ever since that evening he had been attracted to Sarah, but he was a deliberate chap and just then very much occupied in making a success of his business; besides Sarah was young. She accepted Herman. A little difficulty was experienced with old Joshua, the ex-minister: for he did not feel that any *Tedesco* – no matter how wealthy – was good enough for his daughter of proud Spanish, (or was it Portuguese?) blood. Hannah always treated her husband kindly: indeed many people openly criticized her for fitting out the dependent old man in the neat black satin knee-breeches, silk stockings and silver buckles that he loved. However, when it came to really practical matters – such as an advantageous marriage for their children, she did not allow his aristocratic ideals of family to stand in the way. We find this record in the synagogue archives:

Sarah Piza married Herman Meyer 12

May 1847

(Sarah, daughter of Joshua and Hannah

Piza
Herman, son of Moses and Frederica
Meyer, born Levy)

The fruit of this marriage were two children, Evelyn and Moritz, both born in St. Thomas. By the time the boy was seven Herman had done so well in his affairs that he decided to leave the island and take his little family to make Hamburg their home. His business he confided to the care of Ben Luria, who had long been in his employ. In Hamburg he established the household in style.

Sarah responded to her dignified position. She kept a handsome well run house and was extremely aristocratic in her manner. She required her servants to address her as if she were Royalty. Indeed, to Royalty itself she granted no superiority: for once it happened that her family was taking a holiday at Pymont, a fashionable resort, and as was their custom, they had the finest suite that the hotel provided. The proprietor came to her in distress, for he had just received word that the Princess of Waldeck was arriving. He humbly begged the *gnädige Frau* to take some other quite good rooms that he would prepare, so that he might give of his best to the Princess. Sarah haughtily refused to change. And that was all there was to it!

Socially, the Meyers mingled with a wealthy Christian set. Their name did not label them as Jews and Herman did not

advertise his antecedents. But Sarah, who had been strictly brought up in religious observance, was sorely troubled. She saw the prejudice with which Jews were generally regarded in Germany – she could not herself help feeling it toward those loud people who she saw were the cause of this scorn. She was torn between race loyalty and social pride, and in the conflict between these emotions she became decidedly neurotic. Her relatives in St. Thomas felt that she was putting on airs. They criticized her motives. When she kindly offered to take one of the children of her sister Bienvenida (poor as the proverbial church-mouse) to live with her and educate, she intimated that she and "Uncle Meyer" selected Alfred because his name had no Hebraic association as did "Joshua" or "Samuel". Whatever the cause, it was Alfred Lindo who lived in her household from the time he was seven until he was eighteen.

The daughter Evelyn and the son Moritz were unusually handsome children and their parents took a consuming pride in them. Evy became a great Belle; her fair beauty, supplemented by intelligence and animated wit, made her the much sought companion of Gravs and Barons. For that day and age, she was quite daring, too: her arm being extravagantly admired by one of her beaux, she responded with "ah, but that is *nothing* compared to my leg!"

Her Jewish origin was never suspected. But the beauty was so sure of herself that on one occasion she boasted to her noble companion of her antecedents. So confident was she that her magnetic personality could sweep aside all prejudice. Alas – she did not realize the depth of this prejudice: at the next ball she was neglected, positively deserted. Gradually, the ostracism wore off, but she never again attempted to exercise her broadening influence on the bigot.

Moritz was equally popular, and strikingly good-looking: it is said that when he, an aristocratic blond, and his dark romantic looking cousin Julius Sasso walked down the Alsterstrasse together, there was a general craning of necks among the ladies.

When she was eighteen, Evy married Herman Wolff, a man twenty years her senior and (rather surprisingly, considering all Evy's gentile associations) the son of Orthodox Jewish parents. His brother was a famous physician in Hamburg. They continued to move in society, and Evy's popularity and reputation for beauty endured. She was often described as "the handsomest woman in Hamburg". While she did not 'cut' her connections of typical Hebraic appearance, she did *explain* them while she nodded casually as she drove by with her aristocratic friends, saying. "This is my tailor", or "Just my dressmaker"!

Moritz fell in love with a Jewish girl, but she rejected him. It is said that he then became embittered against the race. At any

rate, he later completely lost his heart to Sophie Reimers, a Christian girl of great beauty. Her mother, like his, was from St. Thomas. Sophie's father rigorously opposed the match on account of the suitor's Semitic origin; but the girl adored Moritz and answered her father's bigotry with the statement that she believed she herself had Jewish blood, as the name of her mother's father, a Dane, was "Goldmann" – typically Hebraic. They married, and this is the first recorded instance of any of the Piza descendants marrying "out of the faith". It caused much hard feeling in Moritz's less immediate family. Since that time intermarriage has occurred with increasing frequency.

Evy Wolff's only son Sidney grew up and studied medicine. At twenty-seven he was already established at the university as a professor, and highly esteemed. Then the relatives across the Atlantic were shocked to learn that not only was he to marry a Christian girl high in the social scale – the daughter of the Burgomaster of Strasbourg – but also that before the wedding he was himself to be baptized. When the young professor died only four months after his marriage, of course these pious relatives recognized it as a punishment from On High, especially, as it was rumored that at the root of his illness lay a poisonous oyster.

Being lonely after the marriage of their children Sarah and Herman sought to take another of her young relatives to live

with them: they invited Delia Delvalle, the daughter of Sarah's youngest sister Achie. The parents, fearful of the gentile influence, would not hear of it. However the Meyers bore no ill will on account of the refusal of their offer, for when members of that family were in Hamburg, they received them warmly. Attractive young Hannah – next after Delia in the list of the thirteen Delvalle children – was delighted when her wealthy aunt and uncle offered her a dress made to order by one of the most fashionable dressmakers. But the Piza family could not refrain from a sly laugh at the 'German closeness' which made it a matter of principle for rich Uncle Meyer to insist that the modiste shade down the bill after the gown was delivered.

The last years of Sarah's unresourceful life were rather sad and lonely. Her mind was not deep, nor her interests varied. When Meyer died at the age of seventy-five in 1895, she continued living alone in the big house that was almost a castle, overlooking the Alster. In this establishment she inhabited only one room. Her greatest enjoyment to dismiss for the day her personal maid and to cook on a little stove for herself, dishes that recalled her youth in St. Thomas. She could no longer glory in Evelyn's triumphs as a reigning beauty, for with the passage of time her famous charms had dimmed. It is said that her heart broke when Ernest Luria, her cousin, brought out from Venezuela Anita de Sola, his breath-takingly lovely bride. She realized that a new queen had come to reign in her realm, and

unwilling to take second place, Evy went into retirement. She never forgave her daughter-in-law for remarrying after four years of widowhood. Sarah outlived her husband by twelve years. Her sister Rebecca also resided in Hamburg and she and her family were among her very few visitors. How different were these two sisters, the elder, socially ambitious, vain and self-centered; the younger, a worker, unselfish, devoted: both, however, handsome and dignified. In 1907, after a year of terrible suffering from internal cancer, Sarah died.

Reprinted from: *The Chronicle of Joshua Piza and His Descendants*, by Vida Lindo Guiterman, New York.

Copied with courtesy of Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus, Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion.