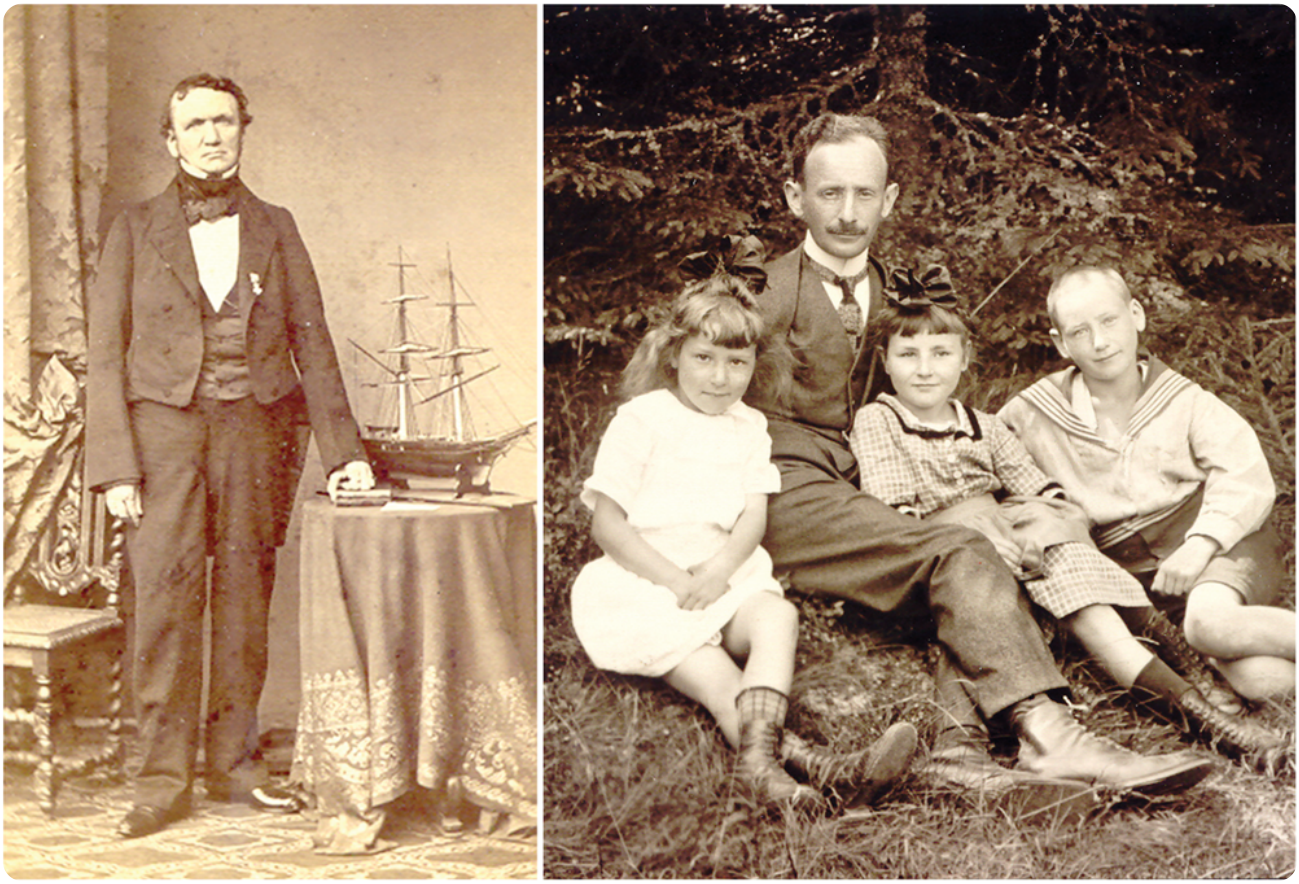
Science Societies

Recognizing our privilege

By Jessica G. Davis

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Left: Carl Staegemann, the author's great-great-great grandfather. Right: Lazar Schargorodsky with his children, including the author's grandfather (on the right).

Members Forum is a place for ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members to share their opinions and perspectives on any issue relevant to our members. The views and opinions expressed in this column are not necessarily those of the publisher.

I am happy to see the Societies' commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, in all that has been written, I haven't seen an acknowledgment of how white people in America have benefitted from the oppression of others. With that in mind, I would like to tell my family story as one example within the larger historical setting of our country.

In the past, I used to think my family was immune from racism because we weren't even here before the Civil War. We couldn't have been guilty of genocide or stealing people's labor because we weren't even here, right? My father's ancestors came from Wales in the mid-1800s, and my mother was an immigrant to the USA from Germany, arriving in 1960. So how could I be responsible for or have benefitted from slavery of African Americans or genocide of Native Americans?

Wealth from Slavery Passed Down

In 2003, my mother passed away, and as we sorted her things, we found silverware with the initials 'CAS' engraved on them. I asked my uncle in Germany whose initials these were, and I learned about my great-great-great grandfather, Carl August

Staegemann. Carl Staegemann was the captain of a ship who became wealthy in the slave trade. He collected cowry shells from West African beaches, bought Africans in exchange for cowry shells, and then transported the enslaved people to Zanzibar off the coast of East Africa, where they were sold in exchange for gold. From Zanzibar, the enslaved were destined for Arabia, India, or China. These Africans weren't destined for America, so did that mean our family could still maintain its innocence? My great-great-great grandfather gained wealth from slavery, which was passed down for generations, ending in silver in my siblings' and my own hands.

Before my mom died, when I was a young adult, she revealed to me that her father who died in World War II had been Jewish. He had hidden his identity to protect himself and his family. His father had emigrated from Ukraine and had apparently escaped pogroms in his ancestral home of Schargorod and fled to Germany after receiving his education in Odessa. He was a talented mechanical engineer who was protected by Hermann Göring because of his inventions related to diesel engines and military vehicles. Life is complicated. Was this branch of my family victims of the holocaust? No. Were they heroic? No. They did what they could. They just tried to survive.

Inheritance from Native American Land

In recent years, my brother has been investigating the other side of the family, my dad's family from Wales. My grandmother's family were farmers near Cambria, WI, and my grandfather's family farmed near Crawfordsville, IA. Through my brother's research, we have learned that Cambria is in Ho-Chunk territory (the tribe sometimes called the Winnebago). In the 1830s, there was a series of treaties between the U.S. government and the Ho-Chunk (those treaties were always coerced by the U.S. government) in which the Ho-Chunk sold their land and were compelled to move. The last of their land was sold under compulsion in 1837. Our family, the Daniels, arrived a few years later in

the 1840s (about 20 years before the Civil War), enticed by the opportunity to buy land affordably and finally own their own farm after many years of paying rent to English landowners in Wales. And I imagine the land must have seemed empty, but it hadn't been empty for long. I wonder if they might have found artifacts that the Ho-Chunk had left behind not so long before. The Daniels were of a national origin encouraged by the U.S. government to come live here, and my family clearly benefited from the crimes against the Ho-Chunk.



Left: The Davis family farm near Crawfordsville, IA. Right: The author's father with his grandparents, R.V. and Liza Davis.

In the early 19th century, there were several Native American groups in Iowa; on the eastern edge of Iowa along the Mississippi, the Sauk and Meskwaki were the primary groups. They were originally in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ontario but had been pushed into Illinois and Iowa in search of food and as a result of warfare. In 1830, the Indian Removal Act forced all the native people east of the Mississippi to move west of the river. A Sauk leader named Black Hawk rebelled, which led to the Black Hawk War (1832) that pushed Native Americans from Illinois into Iowa. The Black Hawk Purchase was imposed on the Native Americans as retribution for Black Hawk's rebellion. This forced purchase of a strip of land in eastern Iowa opened that land to settlement by white farmers, which includes the area around Crawfordsville where my family farmed. The land was purchased from the Native Americans for $0.11/ac; when the Davises arrived around 1870, they paid $2/ac. My father was an only child and wasn't interested in farming, so my grandparents sold the land. This land sale provided the funds to pay for my college education, and I used my inheritance from my Iowa grandparents to make a down payment on my first house.

Learning from History

We can't change history, but we can choose to learn from it and keep those lessons in mind as we attempt to address racial injustice and division in our country today. I used to think it was hard to be a female agronomist, educated in the 1980s and working my way up the academic ranks in the 1990s and beyond. I do not mean to minimize that, but I had so many benefits that Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) did not have and still do not have. I had access to education and opportunities, and I was not perceived to be a threat. I received many benefits from being white. I encourage you all to learn about your family's history if you can, and more importantly, to learn about how ongoing oppression of people of color benefits white people to this day. Even if we renounce racist beliefs, white people still benefit from structural racism. It is critical that we educate ourselves and then act to break down these oppressive structures, so that the United States of America can become the land of the free where all people have equal opportunity to experience life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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Back to issue

Back to home

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