

MR. BLUE JEANS

A Story about Levi Strauss



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A Creative Minds Biography

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Buttenheim

Gold in the streets. Gold instead of mud. What a relief that would be! Löb Strauss (who would later be called Levi) looked down at his muddy boots and the soggy streets of Buttenheim. This tiny village sat at the foot of the Bavarian Alps, near the German/Austrian border. Every spring when the snow melted, water ran down the mountainsides and turned the streets to mud.

Löb hauled his peddler's pack up one mucky, narrow lane and down another. High above him, tiny pink and yellow blossoms cascaded from the window boxes of old stone and timber houses. Though hundreds of years old, the murals on many homes looked wet and freshly painted.

"Dry goods for sale," Löb called. An elderly man and his wife waved to him from their doorway, and Löb walked over.

“What have you brought us today?” the man asked. Löb pulled the heavy pack off his shoulders and laid it over his knee. Careful not to let anything fall into the mud, Löb showed them his assortment of buttons and lace, shovels and hoes, spoons and cooking pots. The woman chose a bit of lace for a woolen dress she was sewing. The man picked out a hoe. Löb thanked them and trudged on.

Löb was born in Buttenheim in 1829. His father, Hirsch Strauss, had also grown up in this centuries-old village. Hirsch had kept his family warm and fed by selling dry goods. Since his father’s death two years earlier, Löb, his mother, and his sisters had struggled to survive. So Löb had taken up his father’s trade to help out.

As he lugged his heavy pack from door to door, eighteen-year-old Löb heard endless stories about people who had moved to America. It was said that many who had gone there as beggars were now wealthy. “The streets are lined with gold,” people told one another. “The gold is there for the taking.”

Löb’s stepbrothers, Louis and Jonas, had gone to New York after their father’s death. They had written back to Löb that in America, even Jewish men

could vote. Now that was something!

In Bavaria Jews could not vote. No one could. But with each new royal Bavarian ruler came new rules against the Jews. This had been going on for hundreds of years. The Bavarian government had even gone so far as to say how many Jewish couples could be married in a year. With fewer marriages, there would be fewer Jewish babies.

Löb knew that if he stayed in Buttenheim, the government would tell him what he could do for a living and where he must live. Already Löb and his family could not live on most streets in the village. They had to make their home on what was known as Jew Street. In addition the Strausses had to pay special taxes on their home and business because they were Jewish.

In America Löb could be what he wanted to be and live where he wanted to live. As for taxes, he wasn't sure. But with all the gold in the streets, taxes couldn't be that much of a problem.

As many as ten thousand Jews had already left Bavaria for the new land. In the nearby village of Hagenbach, twelve young men planned to leave the country just after the spring feast of Passover. In Buttenheim many Jews had left as well. Löb wanted to follow their example.

In 1847, an eighteen-year-old immigrant arrived in New York. He had little in his pockets and no knowledge of English. Yet, by 1874, people throughout the United States knew him as the man who made blue jeans with copper rivets. In *Mr. Blue Jeans*, Maryann N. Weidt presents the history of this hardworking man, as he struggles through long, grueling days as a peddler and challenging times as a young businessman. Strauss's honesty, integrity, and generosity stand out as clearly as his name, making his story well worth reading.

"[Weidt's] realistic descriptions convey . . . the innate drama of this engrossing rags-to-riches saga." —*Booklist*

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