

Inviting in Our Ancestors this Pride Month

By Keshet

This Pride Month, we invite you to learn about 14 LGBTQ+ Jewish ancestors, and welcome them into the proud and resilient history of communities. The memories of each have been beautifully captured in Dr. Noam Sienna's groundbreaking book [A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969](#).

Several years ago, Dr. Sienna created [a moving ritual](#) of welcoming these guests into our Sukkot in the fall. This Pride Month, as we yearn for stories of strength, creativity, and resonance in our traditions, we are sharing these powerful ancestral snapshots in hopes they might offer some.

As Dr. Sienna and Keshet wrote in the Sukkot ritual: "Because many of these ancestors were denied the opportunity to live a full and vibrant Jewish life, and their stories were not passed down as part of our Jewish heritage, we welcome them as an act of healing. As we bring our history and our future together, we invite these ancestral guests to join us, and we pray that our communities may be spaces of true belonging for all." May their memory make us proud, and seen in our tradition. And may they offer us the sustenance we need in this holy season of Pride, and in our own time.

A note on content: LGBTQ and Jewish history contain many moments of power and celebration, as well as marginalization and oppression. Some of these stories include anti-LGBTQ+ and antisemitic violence. We tell these stories not to perpetuate narratives of oppression or violence, but as an act of intergenerational healing and tikkun.



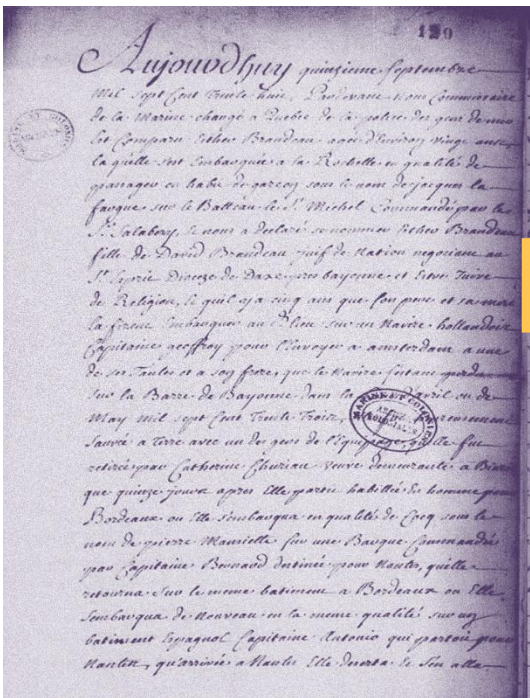
João Batista

João Batista (b. 1560). Beginning in 1492, the Catholic church's Inquisition forced everyone in Spain, Portugal and their colonies to be Catholic. Jews from these lands, known as Sephardim, either converted or fled to other places. Some also pretended to convert but stayed secretly Jewish. Many Sephardim, including a man named João Batista, were merchants with relatives and trade connections around the world. In 1593, in the Portuguese colony of Brazil, Batista was charged by Catholic government authorities with the "crimes" of Jewish practice, and having romantic relationships with men. Batista confessed to his many Jewish and non-Jewish lovers, in Brazil, Italy, the Ottoman Empire, and beyond. Batista was fortunate to receive a pardon.



Sarmad Kashani

Sarmad Kashani (Sarmad of Kashan; also known as Muhammad Sa'id Sarmad) was a Persian Jewish poet. He was born into a family of merchants in Kashan (Iran) around 1590. His trade brought him to the city of Thatta (Pakistan) where he fell in love with a young Hindu man named Abhai Chand. Together they translated the Torah into Persian. Their love inspired Sarmad to write many spiritual poems. His writing explored how love between people could help us understand the relationship between people and God. Abhai and Sarmad traveled across India. They were welcomed at the Mughal court. His grave in Delhi is still a sacred site for many people to this day.



Esther/Jacques Brandeau

Esther/Jacques Brandeau (ca. 1718–1744?) was a Sephardi traveler. Born in southwestern France, Esther/Jacques ran away from home and took on the identity of a young man named Jacques. Brandeau traveled through French cities and on ships. Eventually Brandeau reached the French colony of Québec, on the land of the native HuronWendat Nation. At the time, French law allowed only Catholics in its colonies. French authorities uncovered that Brandeau was both a woman and a Jew. Since Brandeau refused to convert to Christianity, they were sent back to France. Brandeau is the first known Jewish person to have entered Canada.

Maiden of Ludmir



Khane-Rokhl Verbermakher (c. 1805–1888), “the Maiden of Ludmir,” was a spiritual leader from Ukraine. Pious from an early age, Verbermakher refused to marry, and declared they had received the soul of a tzadik/saint from an earlier time. At a time when only men usually prayed and studied Torah, Verbermakher prayed daily with tallis and tefillin, studied Torah, and eventually directed a House of Study with their own disciples. Some people saw Verbermakher as a female rabbi, but others saw them as a traditional women’s prayer leader and folk healer. Verbermakher later emigrated to Ottoman Palestine, where they continued to be seen as a holy woman.

Simeon Solomon



Simeon Solomon (1840–1905) was an Anglo-Jewish artist and writer. Solomon excelled as an artist from a young age. He joined a circle of artists who questioned mainstream ideas, especially about gender and sexuality. People liked his art, which explored both Jewish and classical subjects, and showed people who looked both masculine and feminine. In 1871 he published his only book, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*. It drew on biblical language to imagine a mystical journey to discover the secrets of true love. Solomon was arrested in 1873 for having a relationship with a man. Abandoned by many of his friends and relatives, he stopped working as an artist.



Moïse Maurice Zekri

Moïse Maurice Zekri (1879-1942) was born in Algiers and migrated to Paris around 1900, part of a large wave of Jewish and Muslim Algerian men looking for work. French people were biased against Arabs and Algerians in general, no matter whether they were Jewish or Muslim. Moïse ran a cafe called Maurice's Bar that was popular with gay men. The cafe was harassed, raided, and then closed by police for hosting gay men and drag queens. Zekri opened another cafe in Paris called La Perle, and also lived in Belgium, Italy, and Argentina. He was living in Paris when the Nazis occupied France, and was sent to a concentration camp and killed there in 1942.



Jacob Israël De Haan

Jacob Israël De Haan (1881–1924) was a politically engaged Dutch Jewish writer. He was fired from his job as a schoolteacher after he wrote a novel, *Pipelines*, with a gay love story in it. In 1919, De Haan moved to Palestine, where there was tension between the Zionist Jews and the Arab communities living there. De Haan was disappointed that the Zionists seemed unwilling to work with Arabs and that his Zionist community did not want to integrate with Arab society. He began to spend time both with Arabs and with the Hasidic Jewish communities which were opposed to Zionism. In 1924, a month after publishing his second book of poems, De Haan was murdered by a Zionist paramilitary organization. They attempted to frame his death as caused by a jealous Arab lover.

Jessie Sampter



Jessie Sampter (1883–1938) was an American Jewish writer and Zionist thinker born in New York City. She contracted polio at 13, and lived for the rest of her life with pain, weakness, and limited mobility. As a young woman, Sampter developed her sense of Jewish peoplehood through reading literature and poetry, and was inspired by her friendships with some famous Jewish writers and thinkers. Sampter moved to a kibbutz/communal farm in Palestine in 1919, where she published dozens of Zionist books, essays, and educational materials. She met a Russian immigrant named Leah Berlin, and the two of them lived together, along with a Yemenite orphan that they adopted, for almost all the remainder of Sampter's life.

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Karl M. Baer

Karl M. Baer (1885–1956) was a German Jewish journalist, activist, and Zionist leader. He was born intersex and assigned female at birth. While living as a woman, Baer met a young Jewish woman, Beyla Hanna Heilpern, and fell in love; after Heilpern and Baer began living together, Baer decided to live as a man. Baer began consulting with doctor Magnus Hirschfeld to make a gender transition. All his official records were amended to affirm his male identity. He published a memoir under the pseudonym “N.O. Body,” which was enthusiastically received. Baer and Heilpern married in 1907. After his wife’s untimely death, Baer remarried, and immigrated to British Palestine.

Pearl M. Hart



Pearl M. Hart (1890–1975) was an American Jewish lawyer, activist, and educator. She was one of the first female attorneys to specialize in criminal law. Hart devoted her professional life to defending women, children, immigrants, and gay men and lesbians. She taught people studying law and social work about these issues. She was one of the founding members of the Chicago Mattachine Society, one of the first LGBTQ+ organizations in the United States. Being gay and lesbian was illegal at the time, so she offered free legal advice to gay men and lesbians, represented them in court, and told people when the police were planning to come after them. She was known as “The Guardian Angel of Chicago’s Gay Community.”



Eve Adams

Eve Adams (1891-1943) was a Jewish writer and lesbian activist who moved from Poland to the United States in 1912. She dreamed of creating a more equal and peaceful world. She organized gatherings in Chicago and New York City where gay men and lesbians could come together and discuss their ideas. She also wrote a book about the lesbians in her life, and their relationships. At the time, being a lesbian was illegal. The police found her book, arrested her, and then made her return to Europe. She later died in the Holocaust.

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Vera Lachmann



Vera Lachmann (1904–1985), originally from Germany, was a scholar, poet, and teacher. She studied languages and Greek philosophy. When the Nazi government made it hard for Jews to go to school, she opened a school for Jewish children. Eventually she fled Germany before the Holocaust. In the United States she taught Latin and Greek. She developed a lifelong partnership with Tui St. George Tucker, a female composer. Together they ran an educational summer camp, Camp Catawba. Lachmann wrote a book of poetry that celebrated love between women, and dedicated her book to Tucker.

Rina Natan



Rina Natan (1923–1979) was the first transgender woman known to have medically transitioned in Israel. Born in Germany, she immigrated to Palestine in 1946 and fought in the 1948 war. In 1953, Natan was arrested in Tiberias while dressed as a woman. She explained to the police that she was a woman “in my soul and in my feelings, but through a physiological mistake I was born as a boy.” Inspired by the news of an American trans woman’s successful surgery, Rina Natan began advocating for surgical intervention for her own case. A few years later she underwent surgical transition, and received a new identity card affirming her name and gender. In 1958 she left Israel, and eventually married a German businessman.

Frank Kameny



Frank Kameny (1925–2011) was a pioneering American Jewish gay rights activist, who coined the slogan “Gay is Good.” After serving in the army in World War II, he studied astronomy. He lost his job working for the government because he was gay during a time that the United States investigated and fired government workers who were gay or lesbian or who had progressive political views. Kameny argued before the Supreme Court that losing his job was unjust. When his case was denied, he realized that gay people needed to fight for their rights. He cofounded one of the first gay rights organizations, the Mattachine Society of Washington, and was active in LGBTQ+ activism until his death.

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