

# Slifka

*Center for Jewish Life at Yale*

## A Story of Four Brothers



Isaac Nassau



Louis Nassau, Aaron Nassau, and Ben Nassau

*Written February 2021:*

The following is a family history of what is believed to be the only instance of four brothers graduating from Yale Law School. Impoverished immigrants from Eastern Europe of the Jewish faith, the four were students during the 1920s and early 1930s.

Their father, born Moshe Nessitsky to later become Morris Nassau, came to this country in 1907. Five years later he was joined by his eight children and his wife, Matilda. Following in the footsteps of his own father, Morris had become a Hebrew teacher. He had established a small Hebrew school in Hartford, Connecticut so that he could earn enough to send for his family.

From that humble beginning started a remarkable American success story; a record four brothers were to graduate Yale Law School:

**Isaac Nassau '25, Aaron Nassau '27, Benjamin Nassau '30, and Louis Nassau '32**

### Isaac Nassau (c. 1900 – 1981)



*Isaac Nassau (third from left) with Yale Law Journal Board*

The Nessitsky family originated from the small village of Ivye, near Vilna, Russia, in the Pale of Settlement. The local yeshiva was not comprehensive enough for brother Isaac, who at 10 was the one student chosen to attend a more advanced program in a larger town to advance his education. By the age of 11 he had completed the first five books of the Talmud and additional sacred texts. Isaac stayed with an aunt, and was also accommodated by other members of the community who considered it an honor to host a yeshiva student. Isaac developed a love of learning and law, and a way of interpreting texts and facts that served him throughout his life.

In 1912, at the age of 13, Isaac arrived in Hartford, Connecticut with his mother, 6 brothers, and a sister. His intellect carried him to Wesleyan University, and then to Yale Law School. Although more than qualified to gain admission - but facing strict quotas for Jewish students - he initially did not complete the process for entrance.

When Yale Law School Dean Thomas Swan asked for an explanation, Isaac replied that because he was Jewish he was not eligible for a much-needed scholarship. The Dean then gave him the funds necessary to join the class of 1925, having him sign a note to be repaid whenever he could afford it, and later became a Board Member of the Yale Law Journal. Upon graduation Isaac provided critical assistance to help finance his brothers' educations.

Isaac Nassau practiced law in Hartford until retiring in 1970. When Isaac was unable to rescue his wife's two sisters from Czechoslovakia near the end of World War II, he devoted his efforts to lobby for Israel Statehood. He became active in the Paolist Zionist order, and was given the State of Israel Bonds Scroll of Honor. With his deep background in Jewish studies, Isaac became the Nassau family's rabbi, leading seders with his booming voice and animated delivery.

### **Aaron Nassau (1904 – 1996)**



Aaron was the second brother to attend Yale Law School, a member of the class of 1927, having graduated from Yale College, class of 1925. Aaron was awarded membership in the Order of the Coif, and he was an Editor of the Yale Law Journal.

Aaron first opened a small law office in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, and later Judge Solomon Elsner invited him to join his law practice, with clients including Hartford's landmark department store, G. Fox & Co. Aaron specialized in real property law and became widely recognized as the state's leading expert in the field, and wrote the introduction to the real estate section of the Connecticut General Statutes. When Dr. Bert Hopkins was chosen Dean of the Hartford Law School he selected Aaron to teach the first-year Real Property course in an old mansion on Woodland Street. Years later Hartford Law became the University of Connecticut Law School.

Aaron loved being in the classroom, and often said if he could have made a living teaching he would have done that full time. Once, in an argument before the Supreme Court in Connecticut, Aaron was about to be asked a question by a new justice when the Chief Justice whispered to his colleague: "Don't mess with Aaron Nassau, he'll put you right on your ass."

## Benjamin Nassau (1906 – 2010)



Benjamin Nassau graduated from Yale College in 1928 and Yale Law School in 1930. Crediting his "yankee schoolteachers" with providing an excellent education, he won an essay contest on the uses of chemistry run by the American Chemical Society, which provided a four-year scholarship to Yale College and \$500 per year for expenses. As an undergraduate he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and at the Law School he was first in his class his first year, and elected as Editor-in-Chief of the Yale Law Journal his senior year.

Ben joined a prestigious law firm in New York, on the representation that his religion would not bar him from partnership. When that proved not to be the case, Ben joined the noted firm Fried Frank, became a partner, and found the success he merited.

While his clients included the Sulzberger family, publishers of the New York Times, and Joseph Hirshhorn, founder of Washington D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Ben's greatest personal satisfaction in practicing estate law came from receiving warm appreciations when assisting and comforting clients during difficult periods in their lives.

Although Ben retired at age 76, he continued to go to firm meetings until he was 92. He died at age 104, a few months after the *Yale Alumni Magazine* wrote of him as Yale's unofficial "senior Eli" <https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/2894-80-years-outand-counting>

**Louis Nassau (1908 - 1999)**



Louis was the athlete of the Nassau family. He had been elected captain of the basketball team at Weaver High in Hartford, before the family moved to Lake Place in New Haven to give support to the three older brothers then attending Yale College and Yale Law School. Lou's Hillhouse High School Basketball team won the State High School Championship for 1925 and 1926, and at Yale he became the basketball team's high scorer, and winner of the East Coast foul shooting record.

Lou graduated from Yale Law in the midst of the depression. He took a job as Clerk of the Hartford Probate Court and became active in politics and community service. Later, as president of the Hartford Board of Alderman he became Acting Mayor of Hartford. In 1949, Louis Nassau joined Edward Rogin to create the law partnership of Rogin & Nassau, which grew to become one of Hartford's top mid-size law firms.

Like his brother Aaron, Louis taught at the Hartford Law School (forerunner of the University of Connecticut Law School); he specialized in Wills and Estates. Lou attained some of the highest honors in Boy Scouts, both the Silver Beaver and Silver Antelope awards. He also served as President of The Emanuel Synagogue during its transition from Hartford to West Hartford.

## A Rediscovered Recipe Box



*Recipe box used to hold notes cards for research, inscribed by each of the four Nassau brothers*

When Louis's widow Rhea died in 2003, the family found a wooden recipe box inscribed by the four Nassau brothers who attended Yale Law School. The box had belonged to their mother Matilda, and passed on to each brother in turn, to hold note cards for research and study.

Recently the box was rediscovered, and the children of the four brothers decided to honor their lives by making a donation to the Slifka Center: *Building Forward* 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary capital campaign for Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale, located just down Wall Street from Yale Law School.

That four brothers all graduated from Yale Law School is likely a record in itself - but that these four Jewish immigrants were all accepted at Yale Law (and three at the college), and that three were editors of the Yale Law Journal - is truly remarkable given the era's strict quota systems.

*We would like to dedicate our gifts to the four brothers  
to memorialize their historic feat and inspiring legacy*

*In loving memory of*

**Isaac Nassau, Yale Law School 1925**

*by Diane Nassau Weiss*

**Aaron Nassau, Yale College 1925, Yale Law School 1927**

*by Sybil Nassau*

**Benjamin Nassau, Yale College 1928, Yale Law School 1930**

*by Michael Nassau, Yale '56, Law '59, and Susan Nassau Farber*

**Louis Nassau, Yale College 1930, Yale Law School 1932**

*by Arthur Nassau, Yale '57, Law '60, Steven Nassau, Yale '61, and Myra Nassau Weinbaum*