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Werner Pick, Essay on the Judaism of his family

As a supplement to my notes on Szczakowa, I think it might be interesting for my family to hear a little about our family connection with Judaism. Some of my thoughts are pure conjecture, but having a lot of contemporary letters, and gone through masses of contemporary photos, I formed a fairly clear picture of the kind of society in which my parents and grandparents lived. There is no doubt that both the Pick and Hammerstein families were Jewish, but the Picks became Christians fairly early on. I believe my grandfather was baptised before he graduated, and his four children were also baptised as babies. Grandfather certainly was an agnostic, and as far as I know, none of the following generations were dedicated churchgoers. I am pretty certain that the conversion was motivated by practical reasons. In Austria, which always has been antisemitic, Jews could not be employed by the State and other organisations, but once somebody had been baptised, he was accepted as a full member of society, as the concept of 'race' was only in its earliest stages. (Cornelius, who changed his name from Cohn when being baptised, was certainly not a convinced Christian, but he was converted so that he could be employed by an Austrian explosives factory). As the state collected taxes for the religious institutions, it probably became public knowledge to what religion the individual citizens belonged. It is interesting to note that Waldemars wife was probably of Jewish origin as her maiden name of Jellinek would indicate, but the whole of the Romanian branch of the family survived the Nazi regime during the war in Romania and Hungary by hiding their Jewish ancestry. Also part of that family changed their name to 'Pic' which apparently has no Jewish associations, although Pick is undoubtedly a Jewish name in that part of the world. When talking to my relations, they seem to feel uncomfortable if I ever bring up this subject.

The Hammerstein/Wolff family obviously kept their Jewish religion although they did not actively practice it. My grandfather Jacob was a close personal friend of the local Protestant pastor who conducted his funeral and made a long funeral oration of which I still have a copy but he did not become a Christian. My mother was baptised before her wedding because this seemed to be advisable as she was going to live in Austria, and I believe the marriage service was conducted by grandfather's friend who admonished mother to keep her Jewish heart ('bewahren Sie Ihr juedisches Herz'). Her brother Erich and sister Trude married Jewish spouses, although some of their children were brought up as Christians, whereas her brother Hans married a Christian.

Margaret's parents still attended a synagogue on high days and holidays, but their children did not, although they were not converted. Margaret attended the normal Christian prayers at school, and went to church with me and the family on many occasions. We decided to have our children baptised when they were about 5 and 8, because they felt uncomfortable at school as having no religion. It is interesting to note that not one of the many children of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren's generation have any connection with the Jewish religion.

The society in which my grandparents and parents lived was very liberal and middle or upper middle class; the majority of their friends were comfortably off – many of them doctors and lawyers – and had a Jewish background. A fair percentage of the patients in the Sanatorium were Jewish, but most of my friends were not, especially during my school days as one had to be Protestant to be admitted to Schulpforta

where attendance to Church and Prayers was obligatory. In Freiburg I joined the Freie Wissenschaftliche Vereinigung whose members were almost exclusively Jewish, and where I made a number of friends who also came to England. Here I was of course joining Margarets circle as well, but eventually nearly all our personal friends were not Jewish, largely due to our living in a non-Jewish area in the South of London. In business I came across many Jewish traders and customers, especially before the war when we had a lot of business with Cornelius' old customers in Central and Eastern Europe, many of them Jews who played an important part in the commercial life in that part of the world. Nearly all my parents' friends were assimilated and comfortably off, whereas my parents had considerable financial problems after 1923, when they had the sanatorium modernized at great expense and became heavily indebted to the banks. But as during the summer we had all the advantages of our guest as far as food and service was concerned, our living standard was not seriously affected. However, when after 1933 Hitler came to power my parents had lost possession of the house and we were faced with the need to emigrate, we did not get any help from Jewish organisations, but had to make our own arrangements. Luckily we all had passports which were not stamped with the letter 'J' which became law at some time, and particularly my mother moved freely between Germany and England right up to 1939 when she managed to get most of our belongings transferred to London. She showed a great deal of courage during that time.

We had, of course, to register our Jewish origin when the race law came into power in the spring of 1933 when I was still studying in Munich. Emigration was very much a point of discussion, especially amongst students, who were not sure if they would be allowed to continue their studies owing to their origin which had to be declared on admission or re-admission. My application to continue my studies was granted, but as I was uncertain of my future movements I obtained leave of absence for the winter term 1933/4. I made up my mind that I would try my luck elsewhere when I saw the students burning books on one of the squares in Munich, but as I was not sure that I would be permitted to immigrate into another country, I wanted to keep my options open, especially as there was considerable uncertainty where my parents were going to live after they had lost the house in Kissingen. In any case, I had made up my mind that conditions for us would get worse as time went on, and although I had not read all of 'Mein Kampf' by Hitler, I was firmly convinced that we would have war before long, and that I should try to earn some money as soon as possible. Continuing my studies abroad was not an option owing to lack of funds, although some English friends had offered limited financial help. In any case, I wanted to bring my family to England when I came here, and did not want to spend 5 years before qualifying and starting to earn. This period of my life is covered by my memoirs, so there is no need to repeat my story.

During the past couple of years, I have been giving a lot of thought to my connection with Judaism, and especially the situation in Israel has clarified my mind. I was at no time in favour of Zionism, as I considered assimilation the answer to my family's position. We had no knowledge of the Jewish religion, found their customs strange and outdated, and I disliked the intolerance of many orthodox Jews. This is very much in evidence now in Israel, where the large number of immigrants from Russia,

Yemen etc play an ever more influential role. It is obvious that Judaism has only survived because it stuck to the religion of their forefathers, although there is of course an element of race evident. As I have made clear on many occasions, I am proud of my ancestry, and I do not wish my family to be ashamed of their origin, but I am perfectly happy if future generations grow up with Christianity or any other religion or philosophy of their choice. What matters in my eyes that they should be tolerant and make useful members of the community in which they live. I have no sympathy with the present regime in Israel which is repressive and arrogant, and will give rise to Anti-Semitism worldwide. We are fortunate to live in England which still cherishes some of the liberal and tolerant ideas with which I have been brought up, and which, I hope, my family have inherited.

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