

A Jewish Child's Memories of his Family's "Conversion" from Orthodox to Reform Practices (1880s)

Abstract

The integration or assimilation of Jews into German society was not just a matter decided between Jews and non-Jews. As this excerpt from Victor Klemperer's (1881–1960) memoirs reveals, liberal Jews faced difficulties within their own religious community as they tried to maneuver between Orthodox Judaism and the assertion of their own Germanness. When Klemperer's family moved to the city of Bromberg in 1884, this tension came to the fore; but it also provided the perfect opportunity to "convert"—not to Christianity but to the liberal Jewish reform movement.

Source

[...]

If I recall correctly, the decisive and concluding event of this first period followed immediately after this wedding celebration.

Father has gone away somewhere. Occasionally he travels to neighboring hamlets for weddings and funerals, but he always returns in the evening. This time he is supposed to be away for three days; his departure is surrounded by secrecy and commotion, and mother stays behind, noticeably anxious. Then a telegram arrives, is torn open with the utmost excitement, and read aloud with delight. The five words are etched in my mind forever, like a verdict of fate: "Went well, thank God—Wilhelm."

The most important of these five [words] were "thank God." There were times when I regarded them merely as an automatic, mechanical interjection on the part of the sender; there were also rebellious times when I deemed them a form of inherent hypocrisy. Both were definitely wrong. Surely, my father's own thinking and the positivist current of the times, in addition to the sarcastic skepticism of his eldest sons, had encroached upon his childlike faith even in those days. Any individual immortality, a hereafter adorned with worldly attributes, would have hardly existed for him anymore. But almost as certainly, the anthropomorphized image of a personal creator—an inconceivable and severe, yet fundamentally kind old man somewhere above the clouds—never left his heart and always consoled him. His religious credo, however, like that of the moderate rationalists among the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, was already completely exhausted when it came to the point of believing in a personal God—and that's what fully justifies the deep religious sigh in his telegram. The Jewish religion was dear to him because it did not demand from him any belief in miracles. Yet he regarded the external commitments it imposed on him—holiday rites and dietary regulations—as remnants of an earlier stage of mankind that had since become devoid of meaning, as tiresome shackles in the modern world. These shackles must have rubbed him the wrong way considerably more in Bromberg than earlier on in Landsberg. Landsberg was located in the province of Brandenburg. There, he was the "Preacher Dr. Klemperer." Bromberg belonged to the province of Posen (Poznań) and was essentially more "eastern" in character. Here, he was the rabbi of a community with Polish leanings, isolated from his fellow German citizens, forced into orthodoxy by the members of his parish, and closely monitored in his observance of it. I can still see my father in the kitchen: in his left hand he holds a goose stomach up to his near-sighted eyes, in his right hand a prodding pocketknife normally used to cut the ends of cigars. A nail is stuck in the stomach, its tip gleaming visibly through the outer skin. If the stomach is pierced, the goose is considered impure and inedible. A shabby woman, frightened, waits for the rabbi's decision. Father keeps on poking, he

examines the stomach, he looks at the woman, he removes the nail, he seems to reflect deeply, and decides with utter solemnity: "You just serve up the goose, dear woman; God has nothing against it." The woman goes away happily. That is a fond memory for me. Another one I like much less. On Yom Kippur, an orthodox Jew has to fast for the entire day—not just contentedly eat fish and batter pudding like the Catholics, but actually fast, without a single bite or sip. Staying at the synagogue all day long in prayer is the best way for anyone to handle the hunger. Father is a good eater, a strong eater. On this day, he has to give two sermons and say many prayers aloud. If he is supposed to carry out his duty with proper forcefulness for the decisive edification of his parish, then he has to have himself together—or, to put it more clearly, he has to be in good shape. So, in the morning, he eats a nourishing breakfast behind closed doors. Only mother is allowed to know about this, but of course the children know as well. How often was I morally outraged by this in my early years! I have not been able to get so worked up about it for a long time. I wish I did not have to blame any person for sins greater than my father's. But, for him, the orthodoxy of the congregation is not merely a shackle and a source of inner torment, but increasingly constitutes a threat. He is suspected of liberalism, and it is well known that his sons, for whose education he is responsible, do not lead a religious life in Berlin. The curriculum vita prefacing his doctoral dissertation begins with the sentence: "I was born as the son of a rural clergyman." This amounts to a concealment of his Jewishness and leaves nothing good to be expected. At the moment, the sons still show some consideration for their father's position, but how much longer will the people of Bromberg be satisfied with this mere consideration, threadbare as it is?

And then an opportunity opened up for father to escape from this inner and outer distress. It was a splendid opportunity, but also the most dangerous one. In Berlin, there was a Jewish religious community unique to Germany and, if I am not mistaken, the world. This was the Reform parish founded in 1840, usually called "the Reform" for short, both by its members and opponents. Here, the will to Germanness found its most radical expression. Here, the religious core—and only the religious core—of Judaism was preserved. Yet the orthodox were saying that Judaism is destroyed here. Except for a few words, worship takes place in German; it is held on Sundays, not Saturdays; all of the prayers are in German; an organ accompanies German choral music. The worshippers are seated bareheaded, men and women together. Boys are not admitted into the community as men at age 13; instead, boys and girls are "confirmed" together at 15 or 16, on Easter Sunday. The ban on driving and writing on the Sabbath and all of the eating regulations are lifted. There is no intention at all of deviating from any German custom. The Reform parish was small, but it was comprised almost exclusively of members of the upper class, rich and educated businessmen, physicians, lawyers, and scholars from all disciplines. The parish had to remain small by necessity, and I really ask myself how it actually managed to last for a century, before it became pointless in the Third Reich and collapsed. After all, it lacked a younger generation, because the members' children quite often married Christians or converted to Christianity themselves. So it goes without saying that "Reform" looked like a community of heretics to all orthodox Jews. In truth, the rift between liberal Jews and orthodox secessionists was greater than that between Protestants and Catholics. Officially, and in issues of administration, "Reform" may have been an independent annex of the "Greater Jewish Community" of Berlin. Actually, though, it was a completely isolated entity, viewed by other Jews with indifference at best. In the general Jewish cemetery in the northern suburb of Weißensee, there is an honorary row reserved for the graves of clergymen: "Reform" preachers were not admitted. And had they wished to leave their office during their lifetime, they would never have found a different pulpit.

So it was this religious community, with the purely German form of worship, to which father had applied for the position of assistant preacher. If he got it, it would mean relief from all the distress, pure bliss—at least back then he could not know that it would not quite be pure bliss; if he did not get it, he would be ostracized and forced to carve out a livelihood somewhere else. But at the time he was already over 50 years old, he was suited to no job other than the one he had, and he was responsible for five children who were not otherwise provided for. All his life, my father seemed to me to have been a vacillating,

often overly opportunistic character. Today I realize how, at a crucial moment, he courageously put his bourgeois existence on the line for the sake of his ideal. Despite my little bit of Flanders, I have nothing comparable to show for in my own life. In 1933, I swore the oath of allegiance to Hitler's government, using sophistry to calm my clairvoyant conscience; I clung to my university position, which had meanwhile become so debased, until they threw me out—so who am I to sit in judgment of my father's breakfast on Yom Kippur?

He was, as I have already mentioned, a strapping man, a magnificent pulpit preacher, particularly for an educated audience. He was rich—if not in his own thoughts, then in the virtue of being extraordinarily well read and applying it tastefully; the word flowed effortlessly from his lips; his voice carried far and was supple and complete. And so he was hired and telegraphed his “thank God” from the depths of his heart.

I first realized all of this decades later; nonetheless, on the evening the telegram arrived, it was still powerfully clear to me that it marked a turning point in our lives—clear in the most vivid way possible for a child and perhaps also for most adults. When I accompanied my mother on her shopping, we went regularly to the butcher with the Hebrew lettering on the shop window. It was a large, clean shop. Mrs. Bukofzer, a big, pale young woman with the huge, dark, protruding eyes of someone suffering from heart trouble, always had a friendly smile for me while serving my mother; and Bukofzer's meat and sausages were delicious. Nevertheless, I associated this shop with an awkward image from the early days in Bromberg that constantly haunted me. Back then, I had coincidentally wandered into the courtyard of the synagogue at the very moment when the official in charge of religious affairs was slaughtering some chickens. He lifted the animals up, quickly cut their throats, then dropped them; they made a few staggering steps, flapping their wings and bleeding, twitched once more with their claws, and then lay there. All this took place in the blink of an eye. Later on, I witnessed a similar kind of chicken slaughtering on a farm; it was often explained to me that kosher butchering did not constitute a crueler type of killing than Christian slaughtering. Nevertheless, from that very first and only sight of ritual slaughtering onwards, the term kosher butchering has had a particularly repulsive ring to me, as a result of which Bukofzer's business suffered a bit. (Whereas the bloody partridges and rabbits hanging at Emil Mazur's did not make me shudder at all, nor did the poor lobsters crawling about pitifully). Be that as it may, in the late afternoon of the day of the telegram—it was already dark outside—we did not make our way to Bukofzer as usual but went to an unfamiliar street and to an unfamiliar butcher shop without Hebrew lettering. Mother carefully looked around before she entered the shop; with a somewhat stiff composure, a somewhat agitated and noticeably controlled voice, she asked for “assorted cold cuts, a bit from every variety” and then left the shop proudly and hurriedly. The very moment she unpacked the meats in the kitchen she ate a slice from the packet and gave me a sample as well. It hardly tasted any different: neither better nor worse than the normal sausage. But my mother took the bite in her mouth and underwent a certain transfiguration. “That's what the others eat,” she said, “and that's what we are now permitted to eat as well.” There was probably a great deal of sheer curiosity involved, delight in the previous taboo, defiance, and vanity. But underneath, there was certainly something greater that she felt back then as well.

Source: pp. 38–44 (in excerpts)

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