

From Rabbi to Minister – In Seven Generations.

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This is a revised version of an article submitted to Second Generation Voices, the journal for the children of victims or survivors of the Holocaust, when one of the editorial board realised that I was a Second Generation member who was a Church of Scotland minister. This gave me the opportunity to reflect on how this affected my perspectives and outlook on life.

My father came to London from Fürth (Bavaria) in 1934, after completing his University education and being awarded a Dip Kauf (Doctor of Economics), with his thesis on the hop industry in Germany, which was the occupation of his father. He was followed to London by his mother and younger sister in 1939, after my grandfather took his own life in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*. In 1946 he met my mother, and they were married in 1948. I was born in 1951, and brought up in the Christian faith of my mother's side of the family; my father's side had for many years been only very limited in the practice of Judaism.

Grandfather Carl was a somewhat aloof parent, who ruled the family with his views on life. He forbade my aunt Lis from being involved with other Jewish girls, and from undertaking her BatMitzvah, though she disregarded his wishes and went through with it nonetheless.

Indeed, my grandfather was adamant that his identity was German, rather than Jewish. He fought in WW1, and was decorated with the Iron Cross First Class. His status as a veteran was one of the ways in which his family were insulated from some of the persecution of Jews as the 1930s progressed. My aunt was able to complete her *Gymnasium* (High School) education as the daughter of a war hero, and grandfather wore his iron cross lapel pin proudly when he was out and about. He was friendly with many of the city fathers including the local police chief – who warned him not to look out of the front windows of the family home in Friedrichstraße on the night of 9 November 1938. They survived the night unscathed, but it had shaken my grandfather to the core, and soon after that he took his own life.

My father arrived in the UK with only a few pounds in his pocket, but a relative owned a merchant bank, and agreed to sponsor him. Prior to being shipped to France as a British soldier in WW2, my father was encouraged to anglicise his name from Sahlmann, and he chose Sarle, thinking it sounded fairly English.

My father was not allowed to take a job, but was provided him with “pocket money” in exchange for unpaid work at the bank. Eventually my father was permitted to seek a job, and worked for the bank until he retired at age 65 apart from his war service in the Pioneer Corps, as a company clerk, mainly in Scotland, and later an interpreter in Hamburg.

I grew up knowing that I was half Jewish – but the “wrong” half, and half German – but they were the recent former enemy. My mother was a regular churchgoer, and I went through the normal gamut of Sunday School, Bible Class, Church Youth Club and was an active member of a Scout Group attached to the Church we attended. I was interested in my Jewish roots, but talking about them was not encouraged. But we did take a family holiday touring Germany in 1960, and among other places visited the *Hof* (Back courtyard) of the family home, and the graves of family members in the New Jewish cemetery in Fürth.

From 1969 to 1973, I studied statistics at St Andrews, and on graduation moved to the Falkirk area. I worked as a maths teacher at Falkirk High School for my entire teaching career, 27 years in all, and have taken to comparing that time to the period Nelson Mandela spent in prison!

I had joined the Church of Scotland in 1980, and became an elder in the early 1990s, so on leaving teaching, I applied to become a reader (a part-time minister's assistant) and spent 9 years working a few hours a week in local parishes. But part of my training for this role included studying for a BD at Edinburgh University where two honours courses in particular appealed to my sense of enquiry about my roots. Christianity and World Religions touched on Judaism, but Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust was quite obviously relevant in that field.

As part of the latter course, each student was required to research a seminar topic, and deliver a paper to the rest of the class. I chose to investigate the issues surrounding being a member of the Second Generation, and this was well received by my fellow students and lecturer, who were pleased to have a primary source as their seminar leader! In preparing that paper I discovered that many of the issues I faced were shared by others, including most tellingly for me, the way in which survivors were reluctant to share their experiences. My father had died a year prior to my taking this course, and much of the information about his experiences were garnered from conversations with my aunt rather than him in person. He never, to my knowledge[,] attended Synagogue after leaving *Gymnasium*, but was a member of the Association of Jewish Refugees for many years and kept in touch with some of his relatives who had managed to survive the Holocaust, though many of his cousins perished.

Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) advertised for a part-time Inter Faith Education Officer around the time I graduated, and I was appointed in 2004, working there for three and a half years until the project funding was exhausted. In this role I became involved with members of other faith groupings and facilitating visits to their places of worship by groups of Christians. I thus attended services at the Glasgow Reformed Synagogue and the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation, and met up with their Rabbis.

The Church of Scotland created a new type of unpaid ministry, and in 2013 I became an Ordained Local Minister. To my knowledge I am the first member of either side of my family to be take on this sort of role since Jakob Dessauer (1740-1791) who was Rabbi in Demmelsdorf (or Memmelsdorf) a small village to the north-east of Bamberg. Rabbi Jakob was my four times great grandfather. His father-in-law was also a Rabbi, Mordechai Benjamin Aron.

In my travels I have visited Germany many times over the years, and have been involved in leading youth exchanges to bring young Scots and Germans together. These visits have strengthened my identification as being partly German Jewish in my origins if not in my religious practice. Two occasions in each year are times when I find this identification something of a two edged sword are at Remembrance Sunday, which I find difficult to separate from *Kristallnacht*, and Holocaust Memorial Day. I usually bring into the Remembrance Service I conduct in schools or Churches mention of my grandfather, and displaying his Iron Cross can make those present think about the sacrifices made by people on both sides of any war.

Last year I took part in a Ministers' Familiarisation tour to Israel and the West Bank, and would have wished for more time to be available when we were in Jerusalem, as I was unable to fit in a visit to

Yad Vashem, but we did manage to be present at the Western Wall at the start of *Shabbat* during our visit.

As a school Chaplain I am always aware that many of the children with whom I am talking are not Christians, and my previous work and study of other faiths is present in my mind in all my lesson planning. My life experience and my faith journey are inextricably linked. They share peaks and troughs. As we prepared for the Scottish Independence Referendum, I reflected on my feelings of being something of a *mischling* or mongrel in my ethnicity. Am I a Scot through over forty years of residency, or English through birth, or even German through the majority of my bloodline? And even that is questionable! Fürth is in Bavaria, so am I *Bayerish*, or perhaps a *Franke* as my family roots are more Franconian than Bavarian? I have been eligible to hold, as I do now, a British passport, but I understand that I could also have claimed German or even Israeli citizenship, although I never did! My faith journey has lurched from reluctant Anglican to Methodist, and Reformed, where the Church of Scotland is located. At times in my life I have turned my back on organised religion – and returned when I realised how much I missed it!

Though I have now found a place where I feel I belong, I am also deeply aware of the many strands in my family background that have shaped me and brought me to this place.

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