

# POLE POSITION

Truth in my family's memory is like a multi-faceted diamond - sunlight lets it burst into a fire of golden sparkles and glitter, neon light cloaks it in mysterious bluish haze, while the faintness of the night turns it into a bland piece of glass.

Growing up I believed that my father's family was German. My father alluded to ancestors from Worms or Augsburg. And never failed to mention a distant cousin in Berlin, an actor. There was no reason for me to question him.

On my twenty-first birthday my father gave me leather-bound document folder, containing my birth and baptism certificates and other originals documents. He completed the collection with copies of various documents from his side of the family as well as my mother's family, a genealogical compilation going back four generations. With this genealogy starter kit, he also handed over first doubts regarding our heritage.

According to documents on my father's side, I discovered that my father and my grandfather were not German. According to their baptism certificates they were Austrian. Birth certificates were missing in the compilation. Being asked, my father curtly told me there was no difference between Austrians and Germans. They were all the same, according to him. He explained, that following the "Anschluss"<sup>1</sup>in 1938, the Wechsler family automatically became *Reichsdeutsche*. As the Austrian government didn't signed a peace treaty until the very mid-1950s<sup>2</sup>, the family never changed back to their original nationality.

Even though my father's explanation didn't make much sense to me, other stories regarding his family did. My father remembered, that his great grandfather and grandfather used to go to back and fro between Vienna and Alexandria. He explained, that they were traders and preferred spending the winters in Egypt and the summers in Vienna, where they owned a house on the *Ring*<sup>3</sup>. At some point of time his grandfather, was born in Vienna according to my father, decided to settle in Alexandria permanently, where his son, my grandfather, and my father were born. For this reason, I assumed my father's family originated from Vienna and did not question any further.

After my father's death I was finding it increasingly difficult to answer the question from which part of the world my family originated. Despite what I knew, I had a gut feeling, that some important components to the Wechsler family story were missing.

A distant cousin, the granddaughter of my grandfather's sister had drawn up a family tree online. Like me, she wondered about "the mysterious Wechslers" and their background. She had come across a *Familienbüchlein*(family book)<sup>4</sup>in which Polish was recorded as her grandmother's nationality. She found this equally puzzling as I my father's claim to his German-Austrian nationality.

Thanks to regional online databank I had consulted previously, I knew that my great grandfather Hermann Wechsler married my great grandmother Eugenia Engelhardt in Vienna and that Hermann was Jewish. With the help of Viennese genealogists, I obtained a copy of their original marriage entry as well as birth entries for two older siblings of my grandfather, whose existence I had been previously unaware of. According to these documents my great grandfather was born in Alexandria not Vienna.

A further document I received was a *Knabenregister*<sup>5</sup>(military role) listing the unknown elder brother Bruno. The register contained birthdates and parents' names as well as a column with the heading *zuständig nach*(responsible for) and a column for remarks. As Jaroslau was entered into this column next to Bruno Wechsler's name, I thought the column contained the name of the registrar as Jarosław is a Slavic first name. The column for remarks contained the abbreviation "pol." in Bruno's entry.

Shortly afterwards, I located my great grandfather Hermann's Estate in the National Archives of Great Britain. The file contained a letter from my grandfather dated 1923 in which he wrote: "I, the undersigned, Otto Wechsler, Polonese subject, 23 years of age, ...". This passage validated the entry in my cousin's *Familienbüchlein*.

However, in 1949 my grandfather changed his story. In a further letter which was part of the estate, he wrote: "at the present date I the said Otto Wechsler have no nationality for the reason that my father belonged to a city which was transferred to Poland. I did not make an option to acquire Austrian or Polish nationality and I therefore remained without nationality. I hold a local certificate of identification."

The second letter I found at first seemed to contradict my grandfather's letter from 1923. An Austrian historian which I consulted, suggested that the family may have held a *Heimatschein* from a Polish town, accounting for Gisella's Polish citizenship. He suspected that their statelessness may have resulted in their nationality being revoked at some point of time rather than my grandfather "forgetting" to sign an option for Austrian citizenship.

Unable to speak to my father or uncle, both deceased, I turned to my aunt, their sister to shed some more about the nationality issue. She confirmed that the Wechsler family were stateless after WWII and showed me her "Laissez Passier"<sup>6</sup>passport issued by the Egyptian government to prove it. According to her the family had Austrian roots.

She told me, my grandfather had burned all vital papers referring to nationality on the outbreak of WWII, as he was afraid the information contained in these documents may infringe his children's scholastic careers. After the war he therefore had no papers to prove his pre-war nationality and he spent the late 1940s and 1950s collating documents such as baptism or death certificates to reestablish the family's national identity or at least enable them to procure some form of documents, allowing them to leave Egypt.

For reasons unknown, neither my grandfather, nor his sons obtained birth certificates. My aunt recalls she never understood why official birth

certificates containing the vital facts they needed to prove their nationality, were not amongst the documents, they retrieved. Fed up with explaining to officials that she had no birth certificate, she obtained a copy from the Egyptian authorities during a visit to Alexandria, Egypt. The certificate was issued in Arabic. I asked her, if her nationality was recorded in the certificate, which she confirmed this and told me it was Polish. As she had never been told of her Polish background, she had assumed, that it was a mistake, as they had also misspelt her middle name and hadn't given it another thought.

This document was the final proof, that the family officially held Polish citizenship at least until 1937, my Aunt's birthyear, contradicting my grandfather's denial of opting for Polish citizenship in his second letter. Her Laissez Passer Passport and immigration cards issued for my grandfather, uncle and aunt confirmed that they were stateless in 1958. My father's Certificate of Citizenship confirmed that my father had become a German Citizen in 1956 yet gave no clue to why he was eligible for citizenship.

<sup>1</sup>The Annexation of Austria by Germany in March 1938-

<sup>2</sup> The peace treaty my father referred to probably was the Österreichischer Staatsvertrag, the Austrian State Treaty signed on 15 May 1955 in Vienna, which re-established Austria as a sovereign state.

<sup>3</sup> Booklet issued by local authorities in Germany or Switzerland, in which births, marriages and deaths of family members are recorded

<sup>4</sup> The *Wiener Ringstrasse* often called *Der Ring* is a road of about 5.2 km length, which leads around the historic center of Vienna. Its numerous historic buildings defined the style for the architecture from the 1860s to 1890s. Today the entire street is part of the World Heritage Historic Center of Vienna. Hermann Wechsler did not live there. He lived in the *Lerchenfelder Gürtel* called *Der Gürtel* (the belt), which in his time separated, the suburbs of Vienna, incorporated in 1850, within the belt from the suburbs, incorporated in 1890/1892, outside.

<sup>5</sup> Booklet issued by local authorities in Germany or Switzerland, in which births, marriages and deaths of family members are recorded

<sup>5</sup> The *Knabenregister* was a registry in which all male births were recorded with their places of origin and birth. It was used for recruiting soldiers in times of war.

<sup>6</sup> Laissez Passer Passports were temporary travel documents issued to stateless persons, enabling them to travel. Usually the documents were valid for a short time only.

After concluding my research on the Wechsler's Polish nationality, the phrase in my grandfather's second letter "I the said Otto Wechsler have no nationality for the reason that my father belonged to a city which was transferred to Poland, "began to make sense and no longer seemed contradictory. Not only did it offer the crucial clue to why my family was Polish in the 1920's and 1930's, but it also provided the final lead to finding the Polish hometown of his family.

When my grandfather wrote that his father had belonged to a city transferred to Poland, he was referring to his father's *Heimatort* (homeland or place of origin) and with it to the *Heimatschein*.

The *Heimatschein*, the so-called Homeland Certificate, was an important personal document in Austria-Hungary, issued between 1849 and 1939 as proof of a person's citizenship and identity. As the *Heimatschein* was passed based on the parentage principle (*ius sanguinis*), my grandfather probably inherited his father's *Heimatschein* and with it his *Heimatort* and *Heimatrecht*. He probably burnt the *Heimatschein* along with all the other documents in an attempt to destroy any evidence pointing to his *Heimatort* (homeland) as the *Heimatschein* also played a vital role in determining citizenship after WWI.

The *Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye* (1919) ruled, that the subjects of the former Habsburg Empire would be issued the nationality of the country in which their *Heimatort* was located as documented by the *Heimatschein*. Former subjects could opt for Austrian citizenship, if they were living within the new boundaries of Austria or intend to move to *Altösterreich*, as the reduced Austrian territory was called. As neither applied to my grandfather, he was not eligible to opt for Austrian citizenship, despite what he wrote in his letter.

Due to its important role in ensuring the care of the needy, the *Heimatort* was also recorded in all official documents in Austria-Hungary. The reference was usually made usually in a column named *zuständig nach* or added in the name column following the word *aus* or *von*. The phrase in my grandfather's letter "belonged to" meant nothing else than *zuständig nach*.

Not only did the phrase in my grandfather's gain a new meaning after I concluded my research, so did the column *zuständig nach* in the *Knabenregister*. Jaroslau in the *Knabenregister* was Jarosław, a city in Poland in the Subcarpathian Voivodeship, formerly known as Galicia, located close to the Ukrainian border today, not a person's name as I had originally suspected. Pol. probably meant Polish and referred to Bruno's citizenship after WWI. Subsequently, the *Heimatort* of my grandfather's grandfather Israel Wechsler was verified by a Certificate of Birth, issued by the Jewish community of Jarosław and is archived at the *Comunità Ebrei di Trieste*.

Another claim my grandfather made in his letter, was, that he was stateless because his father's *Heimatort* (homeland) was part of Poland. And indeed, a law on Citizenship as part of the so-called *March Laws* passed by the Polish government on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1938 empowered Polish authorities to withdraw citizenship from all Polish citizens, living abroad for more than five

years. This law supports the theory of Austrian historian's mentioned earlier that my family was stripped of their citizenship as my grandfather's family had migrated more than 100 years before the law was passed.

In a nutshell: my grandfather, born as a subject of Austria-Hungary, was automatically issued the Polish citizenship without a possibility to opt in or out after WWI, as his *Heimatort* Jarosław was located in Poland after WWI. In the 1920's and 1930's his children were born as Polish subjects. They may have had their citizenship revoked under the March Law from 1939. In 1949 the family members definitely stateless as claimed by my grandfather and proven by immigration cards from Brazil and my aunt's *Laissez Passer* Passport. In 1956 my father acquired German citizenship, two years later his father and siblings left for Brazil with *Laissez passer* documents. They acquired Brazilian citizenship between 1964 and 1965.

- **Heimatschein:** A document which confirmed a person's *Heimatort* and their *Heimatrecht*, his right to abode there. Based on the parentage principle (*ius sanguinis*) the *Heimatschein* was passed on from a father to his children, and from husbands to wives. The home community was committed to keep records of their citizens in a so-called *Heimatrolle* despite of where they lived. As the home communities had the duty to care of orphans, the sick, the old and the frail, as well as take back criminals, it also presented an early form of Social Security according to the online article *Der Rest ist Österreich* (The Rest is Austria).
- **Heimatort:** place of origin (homeland) which issued the *Heimatschein*
- **Heimatrecht:** right to abode in a person's homeland
- **Heimatrolle:** Registry of all citizens including those who resided elsewhere
- **Jarosław:** Town in the south-eastern part of Poland also known as Galicia.
- **March Laws:** According an article of the Memorial Book, published on the website of the German National Archive (Bundesarchiv) the reason was that "Germany's neighboring countries feared an even stronger flow of Jewish emigrants, which they tried to counteract by tightening immigration regulations. Unlike Switzerland, France or Great Britain measures taken in Poland were directed against their own citizens who resided outside Poland." This law not only affected approximately 30'000 Jews of Polish origin in the German Reich and 20'000 Jews in Austria, but also other Polish citizens in other places of the world.
- **Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1919):** The treaty which regulated the dissolution of the Austrian half of Austria-Hungary and the conditions for the new Republic of German Austria after WWI as well as its former territories.
- **Zuständig nach (responsible for):** Expression used to refer a person's *Heimatort*. Often used in registries and forms.

## Sources

Burger, Hannelore, Wendelin, Harald. *Staatsbürgerschaft und Vertreibung. Vertreibung, Rückkehr und Staatsbürgerschaft. Die Praxis der Vollziehung des Staatsbürgerschaftsrechts an den österreichischen Juden*. Wien 2002.

*Der Rest ist Österreich.* 2014. kumkum.at. (accessed 04.01.2020)

*Estate of Hermann Wechsler.* Special Court for Germans and Austrians in Egypt. Case #37 of 1916. Archive: The National Archives, Great Britain. FO 856/56.

*Gesetzblatt für das Land Österreich.* Kaiserliche und Königliche Hof- und Staatsdruckerei. 1863.

*Laissez Passer Passport.*Wechsler (still living). Republique d’Egypte. 1958.

*Memorial book: The Expulsion of Polish Jews from the German Reich 1938/1939.* www.bundesarchiv.de, (accessed 13.09.2014 and 04.02.2020)

*Staatsbürgerschaftsangelegenheiten.* www.bmeia.gv.at. (accessed 16.06.2013)

*Staatsvertrag betreffend die Wiederherstellung eines unabhängigen und demokratischen Österreich.* Wien. 15. Mai 1955. www.wikipedia.org (accessed 04.01.2020)

*Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1919).*www.wikipedia.org. (accessed 16.10.2013)

*Verzeichnis der in Wien geborenen Knaben (Knabenregister).*WStLA, Konskriptionsamt, B 96: 1896. Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv.

Wechsler, Israel. *Confirmation of birth.* Israelitische Gemeinde, Jarosław. 1861.

Wechsler (still living). *Birth Certificate.* Government of Egypt. 1937.

Weiss, Yfaat. *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts – Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook XVI/2017.*Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 2019

*Ziviltrauungen in Wien zwischen 1870 und 1920.* Laufnummer 1656: Wechsler, Hermann; Engelhardt, Eugenie. 20.10.1894. Transcribed by Dr. Anna Lea Staudacher. www.genteam.at. (accessed Oct. 2011). Original Archive: *Zivilmatriken. Eheband 3.* Vienna. WStLA, Zivilmatrik, B3: 1656/1896. State Archives, Vienna.