From Ghetto to Agnostic to Catholic Convert

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Jacob Samsonsohn, the fifth son of Rabbi Eliezer Samsonsohn and Lea Jacobstochter, was born on 12th April 1802 in Saverne, Alsace. Before his parents married in 1788, Rabbi Eliezer had to get permission from the Prince-Bishop of Saverne after he proved to the Bishop's satisfaction that he had sufficient means to raise a family. As a Rabbi he could scarcely have found that congenial.

Jacob, his son, was a true child of the French Revolution which had broken out in 1789, thirteen years before his birth. In adulthood he fully espoused the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, however little they were actualized in the Revolution. He even sympathized with the rebels of the Paris Commune in 1848 when, in fact, the Archbishop of Paris was shot dead at the barricades trying to promote peace.

Jacob was a very weak infant. His father the Rabbi pinned a piece of paper with his name on it onto the velvet cover of the tabernacle in the Saverne synagogue. He also got his congregation to pray for his little boy's survival. Poor health was the first thing in Jacob's disfavour: there were to be plenty of others in his brief life of forty-nine years.

When Jacob was six and a half, under orders of the Revolutionary Government of France, the family had to change its name. The Rabbi would henceforth be called Lazarus Libermann, and his wife would be known as Lea Haller. The family had indeed used the name Libermann before. Their roots stretched back to Germany, thence to Poland and to the Ukraine from where, together with the Roman Catholics, they had had to flee before the Cossacks who were forcing everyone to become Russian Orthodox Christians under pain of death. So Jacob was born into a family of wandering Jews.

Home life

The family was quiet and cultured. Later on Jacob could not tolerate dirt or untidiness in a confrère. He was supposed to have said that there may be an excuse for poverty but never for dirt.

His father was most highly respected not only among the Jews, but also among the Christians of Saverne. He had a room permanently reserved for any poor Jew who might be in need of a bed for the night. Is this where Jacob learned his sympathy for the most abandoned? He was later to say that he had the best father anyone could have.

Jacob had a most affectionate relationship with his mother. Writing to a confrère later on about Our Lady, he said, "You must act towards Our Lady the way a child approaches his mother. If something happens to him, he runs to her straight away to tell her. He wastes no time dwelling on the matter. His mother only needs to be apprised of the situation, whereupon she bends down and plants two kisses on his cheek. That's what mothers do, and so they heal the wound. And then the child jumps up without any more ado. His mother has given him a kiss and spoken a few loving words. That is sufficient."

His mother Lea died on 4th April 1813 when Jacob was only ten years old. His father could not look after the seven children, ranging from twenty-three to six years, so he married a widow named Veronica Weil. Veronica brought a daughter Regina with her, and Jacob was later engaged to
this step-sister before his final examination for the rabbinate.

**Education**

Jacob was a weak child at school. He was continually the butt of jokes and attacks from the other children. His brother David, eight years older, who was a bit of a rough diamond, used to defend him. We know of the abuse Jacob received at the hands of the local schoolmaster, having his head banged against a wall by him. Jacob was to attribute his later epileptic attacks to that event.

After primary school Jacob entered the Talmudic School which was run by his father in Saverne. His older brothers Samson, David, Henoch and Felix had preceded him, but none were as intelligent as he. Another of the students in his father’s school was David Drach. Jacob made his Bar Mitzvah in 1815 and began to study the Talmud under his father. His studies ended in Saverne to his father’s satisfaction in 1822 when Jacob was aged twenty. Now it was time for university. He was sent to the Jewish College in Metz.

**Away from home**

There were about five thousand Jews in Metz, the most important and biggest concentration of Jews in France. The College had formerly been a Carmelite monastery. Jacob could speak only Yiddish and Hebrew. On the way to Metz he visited his brother Samson, who was aged thirty-two, and also David, aged twenty-eight. Samson was a doctor. He had long since lost his faith in Judaism and had in fact decided to become a Protestant but, when he went to the Protestant pastor to discuss the baptism of the child he and his wife were expecting, he was put off in no uncertain fashion.

At this time he was a free thinker. He told Jacob during his visit that he ought to broaden his mind and study French and German as he had. A friend of Samson’s called in for supper and he asked Jacob why he was wearing his hat at table. Jacob replied that this religion demanded it, and the argument that ensued grew so heated that Samson tried his best to change the subject. He said later that Jacob had really been very upset.

Jacob arrived in Metz with letters of introduction from his father to two professors in the College. Jacob said quite openly that the had been sent by his father not to learn anything, but in fact, merely to show off just how much he knew. Imagine his surprise when he was treated with disdain by the two professors. This made him extremely angry and he swore that he would avoid them in the future. This sensitivity was to stay with him all his life.

Jacob immediately set about following Samson’s advice and began to study French, Latin, and Greek. This displeased the professors who got their own back on Jacob by ridiculing, in the lecture hall, what his father had taught him. This incensed Jacob, and he began to read French literature, especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau one of the luminaries of the French Revolution. Eventually he lost his faith in Judaism. He wrote to Samson that while he believed in God, he could not stomach all the miracles attributed to God in the Jewish Testament.

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The Jews, he said, were wandering in the desert without country or laws, and they had to make up these stories in order to bind themselves together. Later on during this time of agnosticism he was given a New Testament in Hebrew by a fellow student in Metz. He was captivated by the high moral tone of Jesus’ discourses. However he repeated that he could not accept the gospel miracles either.

**Three setbacks**

He then received three blows to his agnosticism. Ever since his mother’s death he had relied more and more on the friendship of his brothers, especially Samson. Now Samson had become a Catholic. This really hit him hard. When Samson asked him to forgive him for the suffering he must be causing their father, Jacob wrote to Samson and told him that he had always loved and admired him and nothing he did would ever change that.

The next blow was the conversion of David (now Paul) Drach. David had been a fellow student of Jacob in Rabbi Libermann’s Talmudic academy. He had married the daughter of the Chief Rabbi of France, and he was Professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Paris.

David’s conversion shocked the whole Jewish Community in France and they said he had sold his soul for eighty thousand francs. Veronica, Jacob’s step-mother, got her daughter Regina to break off the engagement with him, and from then on Jacob and Veronica were not on speaking terms.

Then there occurred the famous interrogation by his father who had heard from Metz that Jacob was going the way of Samson. Jacob was asked most searching questions and seemed to be inspired in his answers. His father decided to send him to Paris to study, which is what Jacob wanted all along. In Paris he met the Chief Rabbi, but by then he had decided not to become a Rabbi. He could not swear in conscience to be faithful to the Jewish religion. Perhaps he would become a teacher in a high school.

Then the third blow fell. His brother Felix, already living in Paris, became a Catholic. Jacob visited him and was very jealous of Felix’s happiness. He himself was full of loneliness and despair. He prayed to the God of his fathers for light, and light came.

**Catholic convert**

He was baptized on Christmas Eve 1826 at the age of twenty-four, taking Francis Mary Paul as his Christian names. Francis was the name of his godfather, Mary the name of his godmother, Paul he took in honour of Paul Drach or perhaps because like St. Paul, he was of the tribe of Benjamin. He said later that during his baptism he seemed to be immersed in a ball of fire. To the onlookers he seemed to be unconscious.

There are many types of conversion. The intellectual type of conversion is probably best exemplified by St. Augustine. Another example of an intellectual conversion would be that of John Henry Newman. The opposite type of conversion, almost a physical conversion, was that of the Jew Saul; things do not get more physical than being thrown to the ground and being struck blind. Francis Libermann’s conversion was mainly emotional: he was strongly attached to his brothers. Samson said later on that God had made him a Catholic to prepare Francis for conversion.

Who could have foreseen that Francis would, within a few years, found a religious order and later be elected Superior General of the Spiritans?■