

# I Was a Jew

ANONYMOUS

**I** WAS A JEW, until a few years ago.  
Now, I am not!

Many of you, the Jews whom I address, as well as many gentiles, may scoff at the notion of a Jew ever becoming a non-Jew. And my former people may blame me bitterly for changing.

Fortunately, I cannot be reached. I have changed my name. I have changed my work. I have moved into a strange region and started afresh. My past is as finally sealed as though I had died and arisen with a new personality — for it is really necessary that a Jew change some important parts of his personality when he throws off his Jewishness.

Several years of growing doubt preceded my decision that, if I were to become an American like other Americans, I could not remain the conventional Jew at the same time.

Let me tell how it was done — for the sake of you who are actively discontented with compromises.

Understand that I have little more zeal for religion than many of my Christian neighbors who no longer lay great stress on the saving of their own souls but prefer to busy themselves about bettering the lot of their fellow men in this present life. I did not have to cast off a great load of piety — but neither would many other young Jews of our land today. It is not actual piety that holds you but forms and ceremonies; and, the core of righteousness remaining the same, can you not do God and your fellow men equally good service by praying silently in your closet or dedicating some effort to noble works?

It is likely to be the *form* only that holds a Jew, at a certain period of questioning, bound within the Jewish community. I have seen many young Jews, at a certain age, inclined to question the value of old forms, inclined to rebel against the observance of old customs which cut them off from the great human fam-

ily outside. But, when this critical phase has passed, most fall meekly into step and, in turn, exert pressure on a following generation to tread the old path.

To break away takes courage; for, to escape the smothering bonds of Jewry, one has actually to *run away* from almost all he holds dear.

But there is a glorious compensation: a sense of real oneness with one's chosen country!

I need not, in addressing Jews, enlarge on the pain of rebellion and self-exile, family love being so strong among the Jews.

I, having no immediate family, gained freedom without keen heartaches.

## BREAKING THE BONDS

**I**T WAS AT A Menorah Society organization meeting, in a great Eastern university that I rose and declared my convictions. We were about to form a chapter of Jewish students among a student body that outnumbered us more than forty to one. Some seventy of us attended.

First, we were gravely addressed by a professor, a Zionist, who urged the importance of the homeland in Palestine. Next followed an instructor who disapproved Zionism. Then came an excited student, a poor Polish Jew, who spoke English badly, interlarding many words of Polish, German, and Yiddish, to the open amusement of some of our more cultivated members. But, although his speech was confused, halting, almost comical, his basic idea was correct, in my view. He held that we should call the United States, alone, our homeland.

Said he: "We are all Americans. Here we have good things. We are free. Soldiers do not rob us. Students do not spit upon us. Drunken bullies do not kick us publicly because we are Jews. This is my homeland. I am not a citizen of Palestine. I will never be. I am an American!"

Poor fellow! He doubtless realized, later, how

hard it is for a Jew to be an American like other Americans.

But his simple declaration seemed to set off within me a great explosion of understanding. He spoke what I had felt in my heart for years. And I, being more eloquent in the English language, rose in the midst of a clamor against him and managed to gain the floor.

Said I: "I also am a Jew — but now I have become an American. I say it is wrong not only for us who are Americans to make little of our blessings in this country and cry for a return to a desert now owned by others, but it is even more wrong that we should be gathered here tonight at all — gathered together *as Jews*, dividing ourselves from the rest of the student body and faculty. I say we do wrong to shout continually that we are Jews. Do other Americans always cry that they are Methodists or that they are Catholics or that, their fathers and mothers having been Irish, they must always think and act as Irish and marry Irish wives and give their charity and their trade to Irish? For my part, I also remember persecution; and I am so grateful to this country where opportunity opens before me that I want to be a real American first and a Jew only second — and even that quietly, not thrusting it in the face of everyone in many strange ways different from those of other Americans."

Then the Zionist speaker, who felt that the word of an elderly professor must be final, retorted, "If you take that attitude, how can you call yourself a Jew at all?"

And the anti-Zionist instructor pronounced solemnly, "It is only by standing together that we have always maintained our peculiar culture in the midst of rude, inimical cultures."

Whereupon I instantly made my decision, declaring, "Very well — I choose to be an American," and walked out.

And, although I could not make my formal severance that day or even that spring, I did make it the following summer, at the cost of abandoning my credits at that and other universities to enter, later, a new school, by examination, under my new name.

For, having made my decision, I went through with it determinedly — the more easily since I had no kin in America nearer than cousins and uncles and aunts. For young Jews, sheltered and dearly loved in a family, my course might be too hard.

So I changed my name, legally, and invented for myself a false history, claiming to be descended of non-Jewish Adrianople Turks. The dislocation of boundaries following several wars and the shrinkage of Turkey in Europe, made it impossible to disprove my story.

Was this elaborate lying necessary? Yes. For otherwise, you, my Jewish brethren, would have pulled me back into your community or else punished me for my desertion; while the gentile world would have accepted me on sufferance, as a "renegade" Jew. The disguise was indispensable.

Therefore I cut all connection with Jewish life. I have never been in a Jewish synagogue since nor visited with a Jewish family (except as a "gentile" friend) — and how strange it felt, at first, to be *shut out*, to be alien, not trusted, not accepted as before. But the experience only brought home to me the false position of any man who tries to be an American in the fullest sense while maintaining the rigid rule of Jewish life. I say the harmonizing of the two is too difficult for most individuals.

In a fervor of Americanism, I went west, into new country, and tried a variety of callings but shunned the Jewish favorites: finance and commerce and the law and medicine and teaching (which last had been my youthful aim). In succession, I was a garage mechanic, stake man on a survey gang, farmhand, crop-share farmer, laborer and later foreman on a riprap gang along the Mississippi, and other things. And it has been glorious. I have not despised the work of my hands; I have sweated and grunted and conquered at hard labor; I have built up something that could be seen at the end of a season and existed not merely in a bankbook. And I have everywhere been accepted as an equal, despite my slight accent and rather dark complexion and the Balkan ancestry I claimed.

Then, with two years of real work behind me and savings enough to carry me through school, I boned furiously, passed my exams, and entered a Western university as an American — a simple unclassified American. The stiff-necked may sniff at my new attitude; but I assure you that it was wonderful to live a life that is closed to most Jews.

I graduated from the university and married shortly thereafter. I am now raising children who need never learn to endure snubs, who will never be tempted to retaliate against cruel

discrimination. From this pleasant sunshine, I look back with horror at the somber world in which my race-proud kin persist on their ancient and unhappy courses. Life is good. I never regret my step.

### A CHOICE TO MAKE

**B**UT SOME MAY OBJECT: "Being a Jew is not just having a special religion or following certain customs or living in a special community, socially and commercially. It is a matter of *blood!*" — this triumphantly — "and you cannot change that!"

Important, if true — but it is not true.

Non-Jewish scholarship indicates that the Jews are a mixed people, even since pre-Christian times; that the supposedly "Jewish" nose is really a Hittite nose — and far from universal; that Arabs and Greeks, Egyptians and Berbers, and many others blend in the Jewish "race." For example, tens of thousands of Slavs, many centuries ago, are reported as going over in a body from paganism to Jewish religion and custom — and who can count their modern descendants? At the same time, an uncounted number of Jews have gone over to Islam and Christianity. A considerable number have progressed to a rationalized "ethical culture" or to various shades of agnosticism. Anyhow, this transfer has been so great that many of the noble houses of England and of the Continent stem from Jewish "apostates" — maybe even one or more of the royal houses. Also, it is alleged by some investigators, with a fair show of evidence, that modern Freemasonry is derived from a protective political organization of ex-Jews and secret Jews. In any case, the interchange of blood has been so great that a claim or an accusation of pure blood, on either side, is folly. The argument by blood reduces to absurdity. Jew and gentile are both mongrel — and the better, both, for the mixture.

And, since mere religion, practiced individually as such, need not divide man from his fellows, the charge of *difference*, hurled at the Jews, and the boast of difference uttered by them, both rest, finally, on clannishness and custom.

Is it, to the Jews, worth the price?

The time has now come when all Jewry and all its thinking individuals must face the alternatives, as so often in the past: either to persist in Jewish ways, living like semialiens in the

land of their sojourn, or to attempt conformity to the customs of the land that gives them shelter, safety, and liberty.

Woe to them who choose the old and painful and arrogant course, insisting on their position, unique and lofty, as God's children. Can they not recognize that such an attitude is an affront, sure to lead to hatreds and reprisals? Do they not resent the scornful attitude of many gentiles, who openly despise them for their differences? And why blame the gentiles for their scorn when the Jews also, even in their choice of the title, God's Chosen, by implication cast all others into inferiority?

Repaying scorn with scorn has never brought the Jewish people anything but hatred, persecution, misery. That attitude is not noble; it is merely silly!

My advice to my onetime fellow Jews is: Cease to favor your family to the furthest connections, as against all outsiders. It is not the custom of modern America — and you claim to be and should be Americans. Note that the children of other immigrants — Irish, Scotch, English, Scandinavian — put aside their old allegiance (at least in the second generation and beyond) and actually *become* Americans. Can you do that?

In the mass, you refuse to be assimilated or to let individuals like myself be assimilated, unless by stealth or at a price in ostracism. You persist in being unlike other Americans. Your folkways are different from the national ways; your religious days are not the same; your attitude to women and the family, while commendable, is patriarchal; even your food is different — and *you glory in your differences*. With a tenacity that would be admirable if exerted in a better cause, you cling to a thousand little things that differentiate you from the people around you — and then you have the temerity to complain when they also treat you as different — and not (since every nation and culture naturally thinks its own ways best) as superior.

In other times, Jews were *forced* to be different. It is probably true that many of the shortcomings of Jews today can be traced to past persecution; but you are not being persecuted in the United States; rather, you are being given every possible chance to live an American life.

Can you recover ancient dignities? Can you go back beyond the grasping, furtive, terror-

ized ghetto dwellers of the dark years, beyond such humble and desperate coin collectors as my own unhappy father was, in the land of his degradation and persecution? Can you become again brave, upstanding farmers and shepherds and builders, soldiers and statesmen and engineers, as were our remote forebears? A few have done it, here, to their glory and the glory of our country. Jewish youth in Palestine has proved its mettle, if no more has been accomplished there.

There is nothing you *might* not do, as individuals, with such wit and industry and tenacity as is your heritage — and mine. But, unhappily, the rank and file of the Jewish people in this country, as in others, hold one another back.

Only a leadership brutally frank can save you, as individuals, by driving you out of the compact herd; can induce you to put behind you that past which is no more suited to your needs, today, than would be bronze battle axes and skull drinking cups to the descendants of the old Saxons.

Take pride in the past: in the arts and sciences you helped to save through the Dark Ages, in the great abilities that are your priceless heritage. But live, in this time, like your neighbors — not as aliens forever! You cannot be medieval-minded Jews and, at the same time, good Americans.

Take your choice — while there is one to take.

I have taken mine.

