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MY JOURNEY AS A “HALF-JEW”

I was born July 11, 1925, in the London suburb of Harrow-on-the-Hill, the fifth child and first son of John Alter Mendel Rottenberg and Cornelia Boender. My parents named me after both my paternal and maternal grandfathers: Isaac Cornelius. One more child, David Baron, would follow eighteen months later.

My four sisters were born in Chicago, Illinois, where my parents were married in 1920. The marriage certificate bears the signature of then Cook County clerk Richard J. Daley, later the powerful mayor of Chicago and father of the present mayor.

Alter Mendel (the name John was adopted later) and Cornelia had met in the Netherlands, where she had grown up in the small town of Strijen and he had arrived from Krakow, Poland in 1911. In some respects they seemed an unlikely pair; he a Talmudic student, son of a Hasidic rabbi from Dombrowa, Galicia, and she with hardly a grade school education, the oldest child of a Dutch vegetable vendor selling from a dog-drawn cart. Still, in the area of religion there may have been some affinities after all. He was raised in a strict Hasidic orthodoxy and she in a rigid Calvinist orthodoxy.

My father's odyssey from Krakow to Rotterdam had been a long and dramatic one in which the city of Basel, Switzerland, played a crucial role. Grandpa Isaac, at considerable sacrifice, had sent his only son to Basel for a three-months study course with the then renowned Talmudic scholar Dr. Cohn. While there, as he was standing in the shadows of the entrance to a university hall, the twenty-year old rabbinic student overheard a debate about Jesus. Who was this Jesus? What was his significance in the history of Israel or the world? Getting hold of a small “New Testament” that could be read in guarded moments was no small feat for a young man with my father's appearance, but he eventually succeeded. No soul-snatching missionary initiated the spiritual search that was to follow

With whom to discuss those new discoveries with their numerous questions? After a brief visit home, Alter Mendel, accompanied by a friend, left Poland in a quest for truth. The latter, having become ill in Berlin, abandoned the venture. My father traveled on to Rotterdam where - he had been told - a Jewish convert to Christianity would offer him

both a job and study opportunities. Joseph Zalman, who originally hailed from Turkey, had established an outreach program to the multitudes of Eastern European Jews who used Rotterdam as the transit point for emigration to the United States. A cigarette factory, owned and operated by the mission, provided much needed wages while these mostly poor migrants waited for paperwork and transportation arrangements to be processed.

Father Isaac was much disturbed about what must have seemed to him Alter Mendel's incomprehensible behavior. Through contacts in Germany he sent a rabbinic delegation to Holland in the hope that they would talk some sense into his son. But in the end Jesus won out. Through a friend Alter Mendel, who had now added the baptismal name John, sent word to his parents assuring them that it was well with his soul. The answer came from the text of father Jacob's response to the report that his son was alive and well: "His heart went numb, for he did not believe them" (Genesis 45:26). For father Isaac the story had a less than happy ending. He never again had contact with his son. However, in 1935 my father's mother, Deborah, was still alive, and during a trip to Poland he contacted her while fearing the worst. To the dismay of relatives, she received this prodigal son with great love assuring him that, no matter what, he would always be her boy.

I have never met a relative on my father's side. None of them survived Hitler's Holocaust.

In 1914, after working three years as an associate of Joseph Zalman, my father emigrated to the United States shortly after grandpa Boender had moved with wife, nine sons and two daughters to Lansing, Illinois. Eventually studies at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids and McCormick Seminary in Chicago led to a master's degree in theology and ordination in the Christian Reformed Church.

In 1924 my parents moved to Great Britain where my father joined the well known David Baron, who presided over the Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel (hence my brother's name as mentioned earlier). In 1929, when I was four years old, Joseph Zalman having passed away, my father agreed to take over the work in Holland. For three years we lived in Overschie, a village close to Rotterdam, but as new laws in the United States severely curtailed immigration from Eastern Europe, the work in Rotterdam was eventually closed and in 1932 our family moved to Scheveningen, a town along the shores of the North Sea just outside of the Hague. There I lived until 1943, when the Nazi occupiers evacuated the town as they prepared for the planned invasion of England.

I grew up in a basically non-Jewish home. In Scheveningen we lived in an upper-middle class neighborhood. Our lifestyle might be described as Dutch Reformed middle class. Our religious formation took place during mealtime devotions and the Reformed Church Sunday School. I particularly remember the Christmas celebrations there every year when we received a children's book and an orange. The significance of the orange has always escaped me, because it was hardly a scarce item in our home. I was also enrolled in a Christian grade school located in the harbor area twice as far from our home as the

public school. Many of my classmates were children from herring fishermen families. Needless to say, there was not a Jewish kid among them.

By the time Germany invaded Holland on May 10, 1940, I was a high school (gymnasium) student. There some of my best friends were Jewish, but none of them ever saw the inside of a synagogue. Nevertheless, the Nazis gave us a new awareness of our heritage as they taught us to pay careful attention to the number of our Jewish grandparents. Two Jewish grandparents meant exemption from wearing the yellow star. Anything beyond that would eventually mean arrest and almost certain death.

My father was passionate in his conviction that he had never ceased to be a Jew, but in many respects he had been effectively “gentilized” or, more specifically, “Calvinized.” The seminary in Grand Rapids had indoctrinated him in the theologies of the Dutch scholars Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. What had happened to his Eastern European Jewish heritage? That world of Orthodox Judaism regularly passed through our home from the front door hallway to my father’s study upstairs. Many Jews, who looked just like the portrait of grandfather Isaac, found their way to our home in order to engage in frequently heated discussions. But that was “another world,” a world that came to visit “the study,” but never became an integral part of our family life.

Alter Mendel had been raised believing that study and the sharing of profound insights were the true calling of his life. The raising of his six children was mostly left to my mother, a strict disciplinarian like her father had been. It was her Calvinist world that shaped our lives. She was simply not acquainted with Hebrew festivals, Sabbath observances or Jewish cooking.

I later married someone with a similar personal story, except that both her parents came from an Eastern European Jewish background and her father, rather than following the way of Hasidism, pursued the path of Socialism, but eventually also the way of Jesus. Their family too became essentially gentilized, even though her mother never gave up on Jewish cooking, nor on her longing for other aspects of Jewish life and Yiddish culture.

After his 1935 trip through Germany and Poland my father had published a report in which he mentioned attending a worship service in Breslau. During the service it was announced that the local pastor had been arrested for the second time and had been sent to a concentration camp. Attempts to find out from church members what had happened met with fearful silence. “Of course,” my father wrote, “to speak out will run the risk that one will face persecution. But so what? There are times that Christians must endure such persecution if they want to save their souls and be true to their calling as believers in truth and justice.” He knew what he was doing when refusing to be silenced. But he did it.

On January 17, 1942, the S.S. wreaked havoc on our home as they searched for incriminating evidence against my father. Although he was not allowed to travel outside the city, my father was on a speaking engagement in Amsterdam. His arrest soon followed and, after spending time in the concentration camp Buchenwald, he was killed

on June 16th. in Mauthausen. His writings against the Nazi ideology no doubt played a role in his early arrest before the round-up of most other Jews, but his fate had already been sealed simply because he had the wrong kind of blood in his veins. After all, the great hatred of the Holocaust was not about beliefs, but about “biology,” a cancer to be cut out of the body politic.

My wife and I have five children. If a new Hitler were to emerge and a new version of the Nuremberg Laws were to be promulgated, their three Jewish grandparents would be considered sufficient reason to have them killed. Of course, according to Jewish law (halakha), having a Jewish mother means that they are considered Jewish. The politics of the situation is another story, however, and as the generations move on, we see a progressive loss of the Jewish heritage. We are proud of our family and feel blessed. But in some ways we identify with the story of Fiddler on the Roof. Life brings inevitable change. It also brings with it regrets and a sense of loss in the knowledge that perhaps things could have been done differently. On the other hand, there is some comfort in the thought that later generations will be spared some of the “twilight zone experiences” that tend to be part of a mixed-heritage life. One belongs to two worlds, but never really fully to either one. Of course, some Christian/Jewish marriages might settle for a non-distinct lowest common denominator kind of life. In the case of, let us say, Black/White relations things are obviously more complicated

After our expulsion from Scheveningen my mother, now left to raise six children by herself, moved the family to the two top floors of a four story patrician home in the Bezuidenhout section of the Hague. The childless couple who owned the house were willing to rent to us only because they feared that otherwise they would be forced to take in German military personnel without any compensation at all.

One day, as I was bicycling home from school, I was stopped at a check point and beaten up by Nazi stormtroopers. This happened despite the fact that my identification card, which we were all required to carry, did not feature a J (for Jood/Jew). Perhaps my name alone was considered sufficient reason for such treatment. At any rate, my mother and friends of the family thought that it would be the better part of wisdom to send me in hiding to a farm in the province of Friesland. There I learned to milk cows (starting at 4:30 a.m.) and do various farming chores. I also learned that the Lord had not created me to be a farmer, although working with the slender and fiery Frisian horses was a joy.

Very early one morning in the Fall of 1944 our farm was invaded by twelve “landwachters” (Dutch traitors in German uniforms). Someone had reported that we had a radio hidden under the farmer’s bedroom floor that allowed us to listen to the London broadcast. In the process of searching the farm, they also found two pigs which had not been registered because we intended to eat them ourselves rather than fatten them for already overweight German officers. Finally they found me in my hiding place above the barn. I was taken to a facility in the city of Leeuwarden and interrogated for several days. At that time, however, allied forces were moving rapidly through Belgium, and the Dutch traitors, fearing that Holland would also be liberated within a matter of days, let us go and fled to realms unknown.

I decided to return to my home in the Hague. Shortly after I had crossed the rivers near the city of Arnhem, the parachute drop of “A Bridge Too Far” fame took place. Eventually the Eastern part of the country was liberated, leaving those of us in the West to suffer through what became known as the “hunger winter.” We lived without food, without electricity and in constant danger, because three out of the ten V2 rockets that were aimed at London and launched from the woods near our home would return to the city. Many a day we lived on one meal consisting of either sugar beets or tulip bulbs.

On March 3, 1945, the British Royal Air Force, determined to knock out the V2s once and for all, missed their target because of a heavy cloud cover, and set the Bezuidenhout section of the Hague aflame instead. Three months later we were liberated, homeless but happy to be alive.

On March 5, 1948 (a day I have been known to confuse with the March 3 bombing event), Malwina Tabaksblatt and I were married in the Bethlehem Kerk in the Hague, which was chosen not because of its name, but because in Europe one is assigned to the church in the “wijk” (quarter) where one resides. Her father had been active in the labor movement in Lodz, Poland. Seeking to escape the anti-Semitism that was rampant in those regions, he moved to Paris and eventually to Holland. There he met my father and, as already indicated, came to accept Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. In short, my wife and I had met when she was six and I seven years old, not an age when I was particularly interested in girls.

After the war the Tabaksblatt family, having survived several years in the concentration camp Theresienstadt, was homeless as well. Both families were assigned houses that had been abandoned by fleeing Nazi sympathizers. It so happened that these dwellings were located five minutes walking distance apart. It was then that we began dating. The pastor who married us used as his text the words in the Book of Revelation (2:13), “I know where you are living.” (A marriage ceremony in Holland did include a sermon!). The reason he chose that text was because he knew that we had decided to move to the United States. I don’t recall how he dealt with the second half of that verse: “where Satan’s throne is.”

I distinctly remember a conversation I had shortly before the war with a certain Max Enker, a German Jew with Communist ties who was a guest at our home for an extended period of time. He was an “inquirer,” torn at that time between Jesus the Christ/Messiah and Karl Marx. He asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I told him that I was thinking of becoming a labor union lawyer. He then urged me to make a special study of the “Old Testament” laws concerning care for the poor, cultivation of the earth and the limitations on wealth accumulating in the hands of the few.

Max Enker ended up putting Jesus above Marx. He studied theology and served several small churches after he too survived a Nazi camp. Later in life he once again chose Judaism over Christianity and returned to the synagogue. He could no longer live with

the Jesus of Christendom and its creeds. I never had a chance to ask him what he did with the Jesus of the gospels.

I did study law and economics at the University of Leiden, but found myself increasingly attracted to the field of theology. My study was financed with the return on a funeral policy my father had, and which for obvious reasons was never used. I also sold my father's library to the University of Utrecht. When that money ran out I, like my father before me, decided that the chances of pursuing studies were greater in the United States than in Europe, especially for a married person who also had to hold some kind of a job.

Lawrence Boender, one of my mother's brothers, was the foreman of a large scrap iron yard in East Chicago. He guaranteed that a job would be waiting for me there. Before my arrival, however, the Boender clan had held counsel together about the apparently troubling matter of my Jewish-sounding name. They decided that they would call me "Connie," a distorted version of Cornelius. This nickname stuck with me for some years, but I eventually decided that Isaac (being based on the Hebrew word for "laughing") was far preferable, although I have no problem when old friends call me Connie.

I did finish my theological studies and was ordained as a minister in the Reformed Church in America. The philosophy and theology of history were my great love, and particularly the interaction between religion, culture and politics. I wrote extensively on those subjects without seriously dealing with issues pertaining to "Israel theology" and "Holocaust studies," topics that were becoming priority items in certain circles.

In 1968 I became the denomination's Director of Communications, a position that exposed me to ecumenical contacts across the globe. In 1974 the Lilly Endowment offered the National Council of Churches a grant for the purpose of opening an Office on Christian-Jewish Relations. I became the first chairman of the board for that office, while Dr. William Weiler of the Episcopal Church was appointed as the executive director. That ecumenical/interfaith involvement would have a great impact on my thinking and on my life, including - as it would turn out - my livelihood.

First, the contacts with Christian and Jewish scholars led to a process of re-education. I of all people should have been aware of the history of Christian anti-Judaism as a background of the Holocaust. But, in fact, I knew little about the details of that tragic story. These matters had certainly not come up in my church history courses. Now I came to see that the de-Judaization of the church's life and theology, starting very early in its history, was at the root of so many distortions of the faith over a period of more than fifteen hundred years.

Second, my new involvements caused me to become embroiled in bureaucratic-political battles that I had not foreseen. The internal politics of the National Council of Churches were such that Weiler and I were continually kept on the defensive as we sought to promote better relations with the Jewish community. For many years the Council had had a Middle East Office with a strong interest in missions to the Arab world. Many of those Christians, like many Arabs, had never been fully reconciled to the very existence

of a Jewish State in that region. Furthermore, the staff members of that office were far more experienced in ecclesiastical-political gamesmanship than Weiler and I were.

My indignation grew exponentially as I became involved in the so-called "Trifa Affair." Archbishop Valerian Trifa, a National Council of Churches Governing Board member, had been exposed as a once infamous Fascist. During the early 1940s, as a member of the Nazi Iron Guard in Rumania, he had instigated a murderous pogrom against Jews that became known as "the Kosher butchering." The ecumenical establishment resisted all demands that the prelate step aside while an investigation was being conducted. Our much publicized campaign ended with the archbishop's eventual expulsion from the United States and his death in 1987, nine years after I had been fired from the church bureaucracy.

I have described some of the conflicts that ensued in my book, *The Turbulent Triangle: Christians-Jews-Israel*. Frustrated, and at times infuriated, I sought a platform for my protests in letters to *The New York Times*, which they saw fit to print. In the meantime my boss, who had begun to campaign for a major ecumenical position, was less and less amused by my attacks on certain National Council of Churches actions. My job description for the denominational position had stipulated that one of my responsibilities was to serve a gadfly function within the national staff, but I had apparently overdone the maverick role and was fired. I summarily rejected a severance package that was conditioned on my quiet departure without any public comment. I felt that I did not survive Hitler to now sell out my freedom of speech. And thus, on Bastille Day 1978, I was cast out of the "God-box," as the Interchurch Center in New York came to be known. No farewell party, just two hours to clean out my desk and ... no vow of silence! There have been moments, however, that I have wondered whether my principles, pride and defiance had been worth the cost to people near and dear to me.

This was a painful experience. Religious establishments do not always live up to the high standards of justice they set for others in their public pronouncements. One of the sad ironies in my case was the key role played by an attorney who held the curious view that in church procedures members do not have legal protections equal to those prevailing in secular courts! Nevertheless, till my dying day I shall remember with gratitude the many wonderful opportunities I, as a rather recent immigrant, have been afforded by my denomination. Not for one moment have I regretted my years as a Reformed Church bureaucrat. Also, to be dismissed as someone who has criticized certain establishment procedures is more a badge of honor than a cause for shame in the eyes of many lay people. In my case this was even more true among leaders of Jewish organizations. They invited me for "cocktail and sympathy luncheons," and wrote complimentary things about me in their various publications. While adding some nice items for the files, that, however, did not put food on the table-- let alone cure our growing financial problems.

My theological *alma mater* asked me to fill a recent vacancy while the search for a permanent faculty member was being conducted. On several occasions I had lectured there in the field of systematic theology when professors were on sabbatical, and at one

time had even been invited to become the dean of the seminary. This time someone from outside the denominational “family” was selected who briefly used the school as a stepping-stone to greater things. For a while, in the words of that great “negro spiritual” (especially when sung by Odetta), I felt like a motherless child, but eventually, with the vision of 20/20 hindsight, I have come to realize that this decision had probably been to my benefit. That seminary could have become my spiritual-intellectual cemetery.

In late 1979 the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel, a broadly ecumenical network, was looking for a new executive director. The position was advertised in a number of magazines and journals. Friends within the executive committee knew my plight and supported my application. There was a hitch, however, namely my Jewish background. This “problem” provoked extended and agonizing discussions. In the end, I was offered the job. After the advertising bills had been paid, the organization’s bank account balance was less than \$1,000. The salary stipulated in my contract would be available only if I raised the money myself. I began to realize that I had been the only one crazy enough to accept the job. But the subsequent years were rich in exciting learning experiences, as well as ecumenical/interfaith contacts beyond anything I had known before.

As a youth, I had never known that being a “Half-Jew” could be anything but a minor matter. First, the Nazis, then my relatives in the United States agonizing about the Jewishness of my name, and now a committee, whose membership contained well known Holocaust scholars, debating whether my Jewish background might disqualify me for a job at the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel. Only when one has a deep understanding of history, specifically the horrors of “Christian history” vis -à- vis the Jewish people will one be able to recognize with a certain sense of equanimity that one’s situation, although sad, is *understandable*.

I shall never forget a walk along Park Avenue in New York with Paul Riebenfeld, an important figure in the World Zionist Federation, one of the organizations with which I had regular dealings. He brought up the Holocaust, railing against Jewish converts to Christianity who, he believed, were engaged in a spiritual genocide. I responded that my father had shared the fate of his Jewish brothers and sisters. He stunned me by his reaction: “I don’t feel at all sorry for him.”

What was he saying? That Jewish-Christian suffering doesn’t count? The Quaker philosopher Douglas Steere once told me that, when two people hold a conversation, there are six parties: a) what each person said; b) what each person heard the other person say, and c) what each person meant to say. If one only hears the words, one may miss the message. My interlocutor did not mean to say that Jewish converts deserved to be killed. Rather, he heard me through the fog of centuries of Jewish persecution, often by those who claimed to follow Jesus. He did feel that my father had joined the enemy, but also that baptism should not serve as an escape hatch from sharing the sufferings of Israel. On that latter point my father would have agreed.

My wife's last minute rescue from a train ready to depart for Auschwitz has left an indelible memory of the delicate balance between life and death, especially in times of tyranny. According to Irving Greenberg, the bearing and educating of Jewish children in the post-Holocaust era is a counter-testimony to Auschwitz or, to use Emil Fackenheim's terminology, it is one way of denying Hitler a posthumous victory. And let there be no mistake about it, it took as much courage for this Jewish-Christian mother to bring five children into the world and raise them in a spirit of moral purpose and hope as it did for any other survivor of the Holocaust.

We have never been inclined to focus on victimhood or special survivor status. I think it was Harold Schulweis who wrote that "the Holocaust is our history but not our life." While we agree with Holocaust theologians that remembrance is a holy duty, we deplore the commercialization of the death camps for the sake of fundraising ("There is no business like Shoah business" mentality) and we are less than impressed with career-conscious academicians who deliver often pompous-sounding and/or more-radical-than-thou papers at the many Holocaust conferences held in comfortable hotels. Finally, as my writings show, I agree with Michael Wyschogrod and others that the Nazi crimes do not call for a radical reconstruction of central tenets of biblical faith. To claim that Hitler accomplished that would give him too much credit.

I have known what it is like to bathe in the sunshine of accolades and praise. I have raised the funds and written the copy for large advertisements in the *New York Times* and other papers during critical moments in Israel's history (e.g. in 1981 when Congress debated the sale of AWAC planes to the Saudis and in 1982 during the Israeli action in Lebanon). Pro-Israel partisans applauded. The language of the political ad is attractive to allies, leads to speaking invitations from churches and synagogues, and can even be financially beneficial. Personally, these are not the writings I am most proud of. That kind of copy tends to lack balance or a sense of dialectics about the complexities of the situation. In sum, I don't like party-line thinking and would rather be known as a friend of Israel than as a propagandist for Israel

I have also known what it is like to live in the shadows of suspicion and to "hear" the sounds of silence when dialogue ceases and the invitations stop because one has touched on some topic that is taboo, or at least has raised questions that are usually omitted from the dialogue agenda. When religious faith and *Realpolitik* meet, one must be prepared to face the temptation of exploitation; Christians who use Jews and Israel to advance their own theo-political agenda, and Jews who use Christians in similar fashion.

For the hyper dispensationalist/pre-millennialist I am far too "mainline," and my writings miss the marks of a true believer. On the other hand, for many of my "mainline" colleagues I am hard to figure out and my writings seem a bit too hyper about the need for a "re-Judaization" of the church's life and theology. For some of my once staunch Jewish allies I have become too unpredictable. For instance, I have wondered aloud about all those myths about Jewish converts to Christianity (they do it for the money; in order to be accepted in gentile society; because they are ignorant and/or neurotic Jews, and, if they refuse to become totally acculturated to "Christian" ways, they are hypocrites

to boot, etc.). To see Christian colleagues join this chorus of distortion troubles me because I don't think it makes for honest dialogue. I have also raised questions about the often careless use of the word "proselytizing," as if any witness to one's faith that is offered with even a minimal conviction is the equivalent of high pressure tactics and intolerance. Finally, I have kept on insisting that the absolutist view of church-state separation is based on a Jeffersonian figure of speech turned into dogma. It is a fundamentalist approach to religion and politics that has no foundation in the actual American historical experience.

As to my concern about the de-Judaization of the Christian faith, this matter may preoccupy only a minority among theologians at the moment, but the issue has been raised by Catholic bishops, is being discussed in the works of major "mainline" scholars, and is being pursued by a growing network of evangelicals, as evidenced by the Restoration Foundation web site. In short, re-discovering the Judaic roots of the Christian faith may turn out to be one of the most powerful catalysts in the ecumenical search for unity.

The road to rapprochement between Christians and Jews is a difficult one. The phenomenon of a growing Jewish Christianity is a complicating factor. Christian history has inflicted hurts that are not easily healed. We have to be prepared for a long and painful process. Yet, progress is being made. Some orthodox Jews used to spit at the mention of the name of Jesus. Today, Christians are blessed with the insights about Jesus contained in the works of great Jewish scholars, some of whom are orthodox. The apostle Paul used to be portrayed, by both Christians and Jews, as the great culprit who had distorted Jesus' message about the Kingdom/Reign of God and the need for a Torah-obedient life. Today students, both Christians and Jews, are introduced to a more positive assessment of Paul and the message he preached. And recently, Jewish scholars (e.g. Yaakov Ariel, Carol Harris-Shapiro and Dan Cohn-Sherbok) have written about Messianic Judaism and mission in a spirit of balance and openness. In moving beyond the usual tired and endlessly repeated sloganeering arguments they invite true dialogue.

Paul, at the center of his letter to the Romans, affirmed his faith in the future of God's covenant people Israel (chs. 9-11). Then, as a finale and appealing to the three major segments of the "Old Testament," he jubilantly affirmed his faith in the future of Jew and gentile when "with one voice" they will glorify the Lord of the universe (ch. 15). Who will come out the winner? I would say the world, because it will not be Judaism and Christianity as we observe them today, but a radically transformed and united people in a New Age manifesting the Reign of God.

Thank God for dialogue; but beyond dialogue is the vision of mutual conversion and those fruits of transformation which will be signs of the divine future approaching: the Day of the Great Shalom.
