

In 1937, when I was born, life in my family was out of balance:

In 1932, my grandfather, Dr. Julius Hesse, had heard Adolf Hitler making a historical speech in the renowned "Industrieclub" in Düsseldorf, where many local industrialist had applauded what was to become the most horrible period in Germany's history. Though decorated by the French State as an "Officier d'Academie" (with a palm as an order) in 1912, just two years before World War I broke out, my grandfather participated in this war as an artillery mayor. His personal early engagements in bridging cultures in Europe, however, enabled him to foresee what was to develop in Germany.

In 1904, Dr. Julius Hesse had joined the artist color manufacturer H. Schmincke & Co., founded by his uncles Hermann Schmincke and Josef Horadam in 1881. He married Gerta Hanau, daughter of a Jewish banker soon after joining the company. When he heard Hitler's speech in the "Industrieclub", it was clear to him that Germany was on a very dangerous track. He, therefore, sent his son, my father to-be, to the USA to start a new joint venture with Schmincke's US-representatives, the Grumbacher family. They were paper wholesalers when my father arrived in New York early in 1933 to start a color manufacturing plant on a 50:50 basis with the Grumbachers.

My mother followed him to the USA where they got married on Halloween-day (!) in 1933. Three weeks before I was born on 5 April 1937, my grandfather died and his Jewish wife, my grandmother, was now alone as an unwanted person in Germany to manage the family company. Under my grandfather's direction, Schmincke had grown to be Germany's leading artist-color producer. My grandmother could not handle the new problems alone. Therefore, my mother and father returned to Germany with me, a baby of three months.

In the beginning of the prosecution of all Jews in Germany, my grandfather on my mother's side could still protect my Jewish grandmother for a while. He had joined the Nazi-party and stood in front of our Hesse family-house, wearing his brown Nazi-uniform during the "Kristallnacht" on the evening of 9 November, 1938. There he protected grandmother and family-house from being aggressed by the Nazi-hordes. My father, "only" being considered half-Jewish, was not yet in danger in those first years. I – being quarter-Jewish – did not even count for the Nazis. Those questions were regulated in a most "orderly" bureaucratic way – but Germany went further on the path of evil. In the last possible moment, my grandmother escaped to Switzerland.

Still being a baby when this happened and during the dangerous and more than confusing war- and post-war period, it took me some time to fully realize, in what period I had the privilege of still being alive. Falling bombs and running for shelter were a normality for a small child growing up in this mess. While growing up, it dawned in me that I had some kind of inherited duty to be conscious and live my life in a "different" way. But what was this different way to be? Where should I get my orientation, where my value-system? Could any orientation come from religion? Or from my family? My mother had helped to save my father's life in those crazy years of the war, but now, right after the war, my parents got divorced. Therefore, I was sent to a boarding school.

Peter Hesse – July 2008