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Joseph Wolff

Excerpt

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## TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES

of

DR. WOLFF.

## CHAPTER I.

*Birth ; Childhood ; Talmudical Legends ; Early Education and First Wanderings ; Falk and Göthe ; Baptism.*

ABOUT the beginning of the eighteenth century, a fierce persecution was raised against the Jews in Prague, by the students of that place. This spread generally against the members of that nation who were scattered throughout Bohemia ; and compelled many of them to emigrate to Germany and other countries of Europe. A rabbi, named Wolff, whose family had been dispersed by these troubles, and who himself was born in the year 1720, resided at a little village called Weilersbach, near Forcheim, in the district of Bamberg, and was appointed the rabbi of a small Jewish congregation there. Another rabbi, a cousin of Wolff, named Isaac Lipchowitz, settled himself at Bretzfeld, near Ebermannstadt, which was only three miles distant from Weilersbach. These two relatives lived in great amity, and often visited each other ; and both married ladies of the country of Franconia. Wolff had two sons and two daughters ; the name of the one son was David, the name of the other son was Asshur. David, the elder son, who was born in the year 1750, left his father's house when he was seven years old, and studied Hebrew and the Chaldean languages, and the science of the Talmud, in the Jewish college at Prague, and learned the pure German language in one of the elementary schools established there for the Jews ; Maria Theresa, the empress, and her son, Joseph II., having not only arrested the persecution, but issued an order that all the Jews should be well instructed in the German language.

After David had finished his studies at Prague, he became

B

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Joseph Wolff

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2

*Travels and Adventures*

the private tutor of several rich families in Moravia and Hungary; and when he was thirty years of age, he returned to his native place, Weilersbach, where he found that both his father and mother had died. He then married Sarah, daughter of Isaac Lipchowitz, of Bretzfeld, his second cousin, and became a rabbi first at Weilersbach, in the year 1794. His eldest son was born in 1795, and was called "Wolff," after his paternal grandfather. This child is the subject of this history. The Wolff family belonged to the tribe of Levi.\*

When the French invaded Germany, in 1795, the event struck terror among the Jews in Bavaria, for they had heard that the French committed all kinds of excesses. Rabbi David therefore, with his wife and first-born son, then only fifteen days old, left Weilersbach, and was appointed rabbi at Kissingen, where the family took up their residence. Young Wolff's mother and father often afterwards related in his presence, that their first-born son was so beautiful a child, that the Duchess of Weimar, and the whole Court of Weimar, and other visitors at the Spa of Kissingen, would frequently take him from the arms of his nurse, carry him about, and show him to each other as a prodigy.

In the year 1796, another boy was born to David, who received the name of Jacob Leeb. In the following year, Rabbi David went with his whole family to Halle, in Saxony, on the River Saale, which belongs to Prussia, and where there is a famous German university. Here also he was appointed rabbi of the Jewish community. In the year 1800, little Wolff and his younger brother were sent by their father to a Christian school, in order to learn to read the German language. In 1802, Rabbi David was appointed to a larger community of Jews, who were residing at Ullfeld, in Bavaria. Here young Wolff daily listened, with the highest interest, to the conversation of his father, when the Jews assembled in his house in the evening time, and he spoke to them about the future glory of their nation at the coming of the Messiah, and of their restoration to their own land; and also about the zeal of many rabbis who had travelled to Jerusalem and Babylon as preachers to the Jewish nation. He spoke with particular admiration of the great Moses Bar-Mymon, who had been a celebrated physician both among the Jews and Muhammadans,

\* Wolff was not strictly the surname, or super-name, of this family, as the Jews observe the Oriental custom of bearing a single name, which is conferred at circumcision. "Wolff," however, had often before been a name in the family; and the subject of this memoir "wakened" or revived it from his father's father.

*of Dr. Wolff.*

3

and was also remarkable for his Talmudical learning and holiness of life. Among other stories, he gave the following account of Mymon. He related how that for many years Mymon was ignorant of the Jewish law, and of every science, and was, to all appearance, devoid of any talent. And that, grieved at feeling himself much below his fellows, he left his father's house, and went into a synagogue, where he stretched himself near the ark where the law of Moses is deposited, and remained there whole nights in tears, praying to God that he would give him ability to become skilful in the divine law, and in other sciences. And the Lord so effectually heard his prayer, that he subsequently became the famous Mymonides, and was the friend of the Arabian philosopher Averoes, who wrote the *More-Neboochim*, which tries to explain the law of Moses in a philosophical manner, and many other works. Wolff's father also told his Jewish congregation the following tradition, which made the most astonishing impression on the boy. It referred to the life of Judah-Haseed, the holy man, who became the great light of the Jews at Worms, in Alsatia. When his mother was with child with him, she met a Christian, who in driving his cart, purposely tried to run over and crush her. But a wall by the wayside, in a miraculous manner, bowed itself over the mother, and protected her from the design of the malignant Christian.

Rabbi David also frequently spoke about the Pope and his Cardinals, and the grandeur of his empire, and the magnificence of the city of Rome. And of our blessed Lord he told the young Wolff a curious tradition, or rather read it to him out of the Jewish Talmud, which contains a treatise on the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. Therein Titus is described as the most wicked man in existence, and it is related of him that he died from the tortures produced by a little fly of copper which entered his brain during the siege, and increased in size until it became as large as a dove, and tormented him to death. But when he was dead, a man named Onkelos (then a heathen prince skilled in the practice of sorcery, though afterwards a Jewish convert, celebrated for his commentaries on the Bible), came forward and raised Titus to life by magic, and then asked him how he would treat the Jews? To which Titus replied that he should ill-treat them, and inflict upon them every possible torture. Upon this, Onkelos raised Jesus of Nazareth also from the dead, and asked Him how the Jews ought to be treated? And Jesus of Nazareth answered, "Treat them well."

This history made a very deep impression upon young

B 2

## 4

*Travels and Adventures*

Wolff, so that he asked his father who this Jesus was? And his father said that He had been a Jew of the greatest talent, but, as he pretended to be the Messiah, the Jewish tribunal sentenced him to death. Young Wolff then asked his father, "Why is Jerusalem destroyed, and why are we in captivity?" His father replied, "Alas, alas, because the Jews murdered the prophets." Young Wolff reflected in his mind for some time, and the thought struck him, "perhaps Jesus was also a prophet, and the Jews killed him when He was innocent!"—an idea that took such possession of him, that whenever he passed a Christian church, he would stand outside and listen to the preaching, until his mind became filled with the thought of being a great preacher, like Mymonides and Judah-Haseed; and he would frequently go to the synagogue and stretch himself in front of the sanctuary where the law of Moses was deposited.

He would also place leaves torn from a Hebrew Bible or prayer book, in which the name of Jehovah occurred, under his cap, in order that he might be enlightened by the Spirit of God, and also be protected from the devices of devils; and he often put nettle leaves under his shirt, in imitation of holy rabbis. He believed everything that he read, and was exceedingly charmed with a book called *Eegherette Baalee Hayam*, which contained a lawsuit carried on against the human race by the animal kingdom, before the judgment seat of Ashmeday; in which the human race were accused of usurpation of power and tyranny, whilst all the lower animals tried to show their superiority over man. Ashmeday, however, gave his verdict at last in man's favour, by citing the words in Genesis, chap. i. v. 28, "And God blessed them; and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

The following history also, which was told to Wolff by Jews, in which they tried to expose the folly and simplicity of the wife of a celebrated rabbi, made so deep an impression upon him, that he not only never forgot it, but it afforded a powerful proof to him that there are Jews who cannot rest in their minds about the conduct which their nation pursued against Jesus Christ. The history was this:—The wife of a noted rabbi spent the greater part of the day in prayer before the holy ark, weeping and fasting, with ashes on her head; her lips moving, but her words were not heard. And this was for the edification of all the Jews, and the admiration of her hus-

*of Dr. Wolff.*

5

band ; but in the depth of the night she got up from her bed, and shut herself in a room. On one occasion her husband watched her without her observing it, and he saw her kneeling down, embracing a crucifix, and heard her say these words : " Oh ! Jesus, if our nation was wrong, enlighten me, that I may weep over thy sufferings, and become attached to thee ! " This so much excited the indignation of the rabbi, and the whole community, that the woman was divorced from her husband. So the story ends, and even to this day it has always been in the mind of Joseph Wolff.

Sometimes Wolff wished to go to Jerusalem, and appear there as a great preacher ; and sometimes he wanted to go to Rome, and become a pope. He almost every day visited a barber, who was also a surgeon, and whose name was Spiess.\* Here he would talk about the future glory of the Jews at the coming of the Messiah. And then in his simplicity he related that when the Messiah should come, He would kill the great fish leviathan, who ate ten millions of every kind of fish every day ; and who is as large as the whole world ; and would also kill a large ox, which is as large as the whole world, and feeds every day on the grass that grows upon 3,000 mountains ; and the Jews would eat of that fish and of that wild ox when the Messiah should come.

When Wolff was thus talking, Spiess and his family would be all the time in fits of laughter ; but one day old Spiess, with his stern look, said to little Wolff, " Dear boy, I will tell you who the real Messiah was ; He was Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, whom your ancestors have crucified, as they did the prophets of old. Go home and read the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, and you will be convinced that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." These words entered, like a flash of lightning, into Wolff's heart ; and he can sincerely say that he believed, and was struck dumb. No word came out of his mouth, but he went home to his father's house, and read the 53rd chapter of Isaiah in Hebrew, with the Jewish-German translation, and

\* The worthy Spiess and his kindness, made such an impression upon Wolff, that he never forgot him ; and even so lately as in the year 1846, he wrote from Ile Brewers to the clergyman of Ullfeld, to ask what had become of his old friend and his family ? He was told, in reply, that Spiess and his wife had died only a few years before, but that his son and daughter were still alive, and recollected him very well ; and they said that little Wolff was a very droll boy, and that they always liked him when he came to their house. They added, that one day he had said, " If ever I get a wife, and she does not obey me, I will put her in prison, and thrash her, and give her nothing to eat."

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[More information](#)

then said to his father, "Dear father, tell me of whom does the prophet speak here?" His father stared at him, and gave no reply; and Wolff dared not to ask him a second time, but went into another room, and wept. And there he heard his father say to his mother, who was also weeping, "God have mercy upon us, our son will not remain a Jew! He is continually walking about, and thinking, which is not natural."

Wolff, the next morning, ran to the clergyman, who was a Lutheran, and said to him, "I will become a Christian, and be a preacher. Will you teach me Latin and French?" He said to Wolff, "How old are you?" He replied, "Seven years." He said, "Wonderful, wonderful child; I cannot receive you, because you are under the tutelage of your father and mother. Come back to me when you are more advanced in age." Wolff kept a perfect silence about this occurrence, and thus the time passed on.

When Wolff was eleven years of age, his father came as rabbi to Würtemberg, and sent him with his brother, Jacob Leeb, to the Protestant Lyceum in Stuttgart. Wolff's brother had no mind for study, though he had a great deal more talent than Wolff. To sell old clothes was the height of Jacob Leeb's ambition; and he actually did sell some school books, and bought with them pins and needles to sell again. Wolff grew tired of all this, so he left his father's house, when only eleven years of age, and went to Bamberg, a Roman Catholic town.

But, before doing this, he paid a visit to his father, who asked him, "What will you now learn?" He said, "Greek." Then he asked him, "What will you become?" He replied, "A physician and a preacher, like Mymonides." The old Jews who were present stroked their hands over their heads, and said, "Woe, woe, woe! Your son will not remain a Jew; he will be mixed with the Gentiles, and go the way of all the Gentiles." His father gave no reply. He then sought an interview with his uncle Asshur, of Weilersbach, who said, "Wolff, Wolff, give up studying, it will lead on to Christianity, and I shall disinherit you. You will not have one farthing from me. I will leave everything to my other nephews"—his sister's children. Wolff replied, "They are more deserving of it than myself, for they are a staff to you in your old age." Wolff then asked the blessing of his uncle. His uncle put his hands upon him, and said, with weeping eyes, "The Lord Jehovah bless thee, and rejoice over thee, as over Ephraim and Manasseh." Then he said, "Now go in peace; say the blessing over everything you eat; don't eat

*of Dr. Wolff.*

7

with uncovered head ; go every day to the synagogue ; never lie down without having said, 'Hear, Israel, the Lord our God is one God,' etc ; and never neglect to wear fringes upon the four quarters of your vesture." This the Jews call *Arba-Kanfös*, and it answers to the scapularies of the Roman Catholics. Moreover, all the Eastern Churches, and even the Muhammadans ; and all the Hindoos wear such scapularies ; and there is scriptural authority for it, as may be seen in Deuteronomy, chap. xxii., v. 12. And, therefore, scapularies are no marks of superstition.

Thus it was that Wolff arrived at Bamberg, where he was most kindly received by his cousin, Moses Lazarus Cohen, as well as by his wife. Moses Lazarus Cohen was a Jew of the modern style, rather leaning towards infidelity. He read the writings of Emmanuel Kant, Schiller, and Göthe ; and he rather liked the idea of Wolff's love of study, and introduced him to the Lyceum of the Roman Catholics. The famous Graser, a Roman Catholic priest who was married, entered Wolff as a pupil of the Lyceum ; and he was placed in the class taught by the Rev. Father Nepff. One Wednesday, Nepff said to Wolff, "Wolff, to-day you need not have come to the school, because I teach religion." Wolff said, "I rather wish to be present and to hear it." The first Wednesday he expounded the Sermon on the Mount. The second Wednesday he expounded the 9th chapter of the Acts, containing the conversion of Paul. When he enlarged upon this chapter, he said, "the church of Christ contained people who trod in the footsteps of Paul : such as Francis Xavier, Ignatius Loyola, and the many missionaries who went forth to preach the gospel of Christ to the nations." Wolff was so much struck with amazement, first with the exactness of the description given of the character of the apostle before his conversion, and then by the description of the Jewish tribunal, which is so wonderfully depicted in the words—"And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem," (Acts ix. 1, 2, 3)—that he became determined to join the Christian Church. So he went back to the house of his cousin Moses Lazarus Cohen, and said to him, in the presence of his wife, "My mind is made up, I will become a Christian, and be a Jesuit ; and I will preach the Gospel in foreign lands, like Francis Xavier." The cousin laughed, and merely said, "You are an

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Joseph Wolff

Excerpt

[More information](#)

enthusiast!" but his wife became very angry, and threw a poker at him, and cursed him, and turned him out of the house.

Whilst Wolff was yet in his father's house, his father, in order to teach him how to write letters, would give him some models by dictation—the contents of one of which were as follows:—"Dear father and mother, I have found very good employment in the house of one of the rich Jews of the family of Kaula, and have been enabled to lay by five florins, which I now send to you, in order to show that I wish to fulfill the commandment, 'Honour thy father and thy mother;' and also to give a proof of my filial love towards you both."

When Wolff, in the course of time, came to Frankfort on the Maine, he gave lessons to some young Jews, and was able to lay by eleven florins, so he immediately sat down, and wrote a letter to his father, saying, "My dear father, I am now doing what I copied from your model; but, instead of sending five florins, I am able to send you eleven."

Another of these model letters was as follows:—"My dear father, I have now to inform you of something new, which you will like. I was tutor in the house of Rabbi Schlome Blowiz, a great banker in Bohemia; and as he admired my skill in the Talmud, he has given me his only daughter as a wife, and with her 10,000 florins, as a dowry, so I send you a handsome present of thirty florins; and I shall bring my wife to receive the blessing from you, that she may become like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, who have built the house of Israel. Oh, that Jerusalem may be built soon, even in our days. Amen." When Wolff did subsequently marry, he announced the event to his mother, and at the same time sent her £20, which he had received from a Mrs. Crofton, in Ireland, as an acknowledgment of her respect for him.

Wolff left Bamberg without saying one word, and without a single farthing in his pocket; and travelled towards Würzburg. On his way, in a field, he found a shepherd, who was a Roman Catholic, and he asked him if he might stay in his house for the night? The shepherd replied, "Yes, my friend," and brought him to his cottage. He then asked Wolff if he was a Roman Catholic? Wolff replied by giving him an account of his history; and after they had partaken of a frugal meal, the amiable shepherd knelt down with his family, to pray the rosary; but previous to their commencing the prayer, the shepherd said, "Let us pray five Ave Marias and one Paternoster for the good of the soul of this poor Jew, that the Lord may guide him to his fold."



*of Dr. Wolff.*

9

They prayed five Ave Marias and one Paternoster; and in the morning, before Wolff left, the shepherd said to him, "Friend, you are in distress; allow me to share with you what I have got. I will give you two florins, which will carry you well to Frankfort." This loan Wolff accepted, and was afterwards able to return it to that excellent man.

He arrived at Frankfort on the Maine, where he found the Jews complete infidels, but benevolent men, and the Protestants neologists. So he remained there only a few months, teaching Hebrew, to get money that he might travel further; and then he came to Halle, where he fell in with some professors, who were rationalists; but he also met with one, Professor Knapp by name, a professor of theology, who said to him, "Young man, if you would become a Christian, merely because you believe that Jesus Christ was a great philosopher, remain what you are. But if you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and God above all, blessed for ever—then pray to God that this belief may penetrate into your heart and soul."

Wolff had to contend at Halle with much external opposition both from Jews and from the infidelity of Christians; and he suffered also from his own mind, which was too much in the world, and there was much levity about him, which he himself confesses. He left Halle in the year 1810, and came to Prague, in Bohemia, having now in his purse money enough to carry him to Vienna. On his arrival at Prague, the Roman Catholics entirely mistrusted him, saying, "Jews here become Christians by hundreds, without the slightest conviction of the truth of Christianity; so that, if a boy twelve years of age does not get from his father what he wants, he says to him, 'Father, if you do not grant my request, I will *hitch*'" (*i. e.*, apostatize!). Wolff therefore left Prague for Vienna, and from Vienna he went to Presburg, and then back again to Vienna, when every farthing of his money was gone. Here he walked about in deep sorrow near some barracks outside the town, called the Alster Caserne. But while plunged in hopeless melancholy, an officer of the Austrian army came behind him, whose name was Major Zsigrey, of the Colloredo regiment, and struck him on the shoulder, saying, "Young man, why so absorbed?" Wolff made him acquainted with his history, and present want of means; and showed him at the same time the testimonials he possessed from Professors Knapp and Niemayer. Major Zsigrey said, stroking his moustaches, "Young man, if you will stay with me in my quarters for some months, and make yourself useful to me, I will give you enough to eat and drink, until you find some

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Joseph Wolff

Excerpt

[More information](#)

friend to take care of you." Wolff went with him, and one day he was reading Virgil to himself, when the major said, "Do you understand this book? read a little, and translate it to me;" and Wolff doing this to his satisfaction, he said, "My dear young friend, you must remain with me as my guest, and eat at my table as long as you will." Wolff stayed with him about six weeks, and then left Vienna for Munich.

On his way thither, he came to M $\ddot{o}$ lk, a celebrated Monastery of Benedictine Friars. He had read in novels, and heard even from Jews, that monasteries are the seats of learning, where one can improve one's self in science and religion. He therefore went to the Prior, whose name was Father Christopher, and spoke to him in Latin. Father Christopher said, "You must be introduced by me to Father Florian Manuli, I can do nothing without him, because he is the catechist, and a man of great influence in the monastery." Manuli at once agreed to Wolff's desire to remain and receive religious instruction in the monastery, and said that he was to teach Hebrew to the students, and continue his own Latin studies, for which he was to receive ten florins a week and his food. This monastery was a very splendid one, and the monks lived "in dolce giubilo," amusing themselves in all kinds of ways. But they did not like Wolff, and they frequently set on their cook, who was a very handsome woman, to tease him; and as Wolff was once sitting at dinner with the students, all of whom had hitherto respected him, the cook came in, and asked Wolff whether he would eat pork? He said, "Yes," and then she began to sing in German—

"Mauschel ist tod! Mauschel ist tod!  
Ist er tod? Sei er tod.  
Friszt er kein Speck und Brod,  
Mauschel ist tod," &c.\*

On hearing this song, Wolff became so angry, that he gave the woman a slap in the face, and fled the monastery, and came to Munich.

At Munich, the Jews were most kind to him, and he went into the Gymnasium to study Latin, Greek, history, and also dancing: all which were prescribed by Government. Wolff,

\* "Moses is dead! Moses is dead!  
Is he dead? Let him be dead.  
Then he will eat neither ham nor bread,  
Moses is dead," &c.

"Mauschel" is a German nickname for Moses.