Education for the National Community?  
Waldorf Schools in the Third Reich

On the 31st of January 1933, the day after Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, a Mrs. Oberstein removed her daughter from the Breslau Waldorf school. Oberstein, a Nazi party member, was upset by the presence of a temporary assistant teacher from a Jewish background, and expressed her strong disagreement with the Waldorf faculty regarding “the race question.” Her daughter’s regular teacher, Heinrich Wollborn, wrote a letter the same day defending his Jewish colleague and explaining the Waldorf attitude toward such matters:

We teachers place our complete trust in the capacity of every person for spiritual transformation, and we are firmly convinced that anthroposophy provides the possibility for an individual to outgrow his racial origin.1

Wollborn’s explanation succinctly captured the differences between the anthroposophical understanding of race and ethnicity and the attitudes represented by the new National Socialist government. For anthroposophists, Jews could overcome their “racial origin” by fully embracing the German national community and its highest spiritual expression, namely anthroposophy itself. This stance flatly contradicted Nazi racial doctrine, and in subsequent months the Breslau Waldorf school faced fierce criticism from zealous opponents in the local Nazi party organization. One anonymous denunciation charged that “Jews are behind this school.”2

Beneath the rhetoric lay a remarkably complicated reality. The visiting teacher whose presence had sparked the incident, an anthroposophist named Ernst Lehrs, came from a family whose Jewish roots were notably tenuous. Not only was Lehrs himself fervently committed to Steiner’s esoteric version of Christianity, both his parents and his grandparents belonged to the Protestant

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1 Heinrich Wollborn to Frau Dr. Oberstein, January 31, 1933, BA NS 15/301: 58191.
2 August 21, 1933 denunciation letter from an unnamed NSDAP Ortsgruppenleiter in Breslau, with copy of Wollborn’s January 31 letter enclosed, BA NS 15/301: 58192.
church. The family had not been Jewish for generations, except in the ‘racial’ sense, and Lehrs exemplified the anthroposophical ideal of spiritual transformation and transcending one’s racial origins—the abandonment of Jewishness as the sine qua non for individuals from Jewish backgrounds hoping to become full members of the German Volk. In anthroposophist eyes, Lehrs had successfully joined the national community, whereas in Nazi eyes he was ineligible to do so.

This incident from January 1933 did not simply end with contrary positions on the “race question.” Both Wollborn and the administration of the Breslau Waldorf school soon distanced themselves from their initial stance. Writing to local school authorities in October 1933, Wollborn reversed his earlier standpoint, insisting that in his January 31 letter “nothing was further from my mind than taking a principled position on the race question. I therefore greatly regret formulating the letter in such an unclear manner.” Noting that he wrote the earlier letter when the Nazi government was still forming, Wollborn now declared: “I have placed my pedagogical work entirely on the basis of the government, and have fully expressed this by joining the National Socialist Teachers League in June of this year.”

The Breslau Waldorf school, meanwhile, explained that Jews no longer worked there and that Lehrs had been only a temporary employee who left the school before the new laws regarding Jewish employees were promulgated. The school further noted that many Waldorf teachers had joined the Nazi teachers’ association and that all Waldorf schools in Germany had completed the process of Gleichschaltung, the Nazi term for bringing social institutions into line with the regime. A local school inspector assigned to investigate the

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3 Lehrs, 38 years old at the time of the Breslau incident, was a founding faculty member at the original Waldorf school in Stuttgart and an anthroposophist since 1920. In February 1934 he reiterated his conviction that he was a full-fledged member of the German Volk and should not be counted as a “non-Aryan,” invoking his military experience in WWI and quoting Hitler in support of his claim; cf. Wenzel Götte, “Erfahrungen mit Schulautonomie: Das Beispiel der Freien Waldorfschulen” (dissertation, University of Bielefeld, Fakultät für Pädagogik, 2001), 455. Lehrs emigrated to the Netherlands in 1935. Two other Waldorf teachers, Karl Schubert and Friedrich Hiebel, were considered “half-Jews” according to Nazi standards and left their Waldorf positions in 1934.

4 Wollborn to Breslau municipal school district, October 14, 1933. BA NS 15/301: 58193. The letter emphasized that he stood up for Lehrs at the time of the January incident primarily out of “collegial duty.”

5 Freie Waldorfschule Breslau to Breslau municipal school district, October 15, 1933. BA NS 15/301: 58195. On the process of Gleichschaltung in the educational sector see Rolf Eilers, Die nationalsozialistische Schulpolitik: Eine Studie zur Funktion der Erziehung im totalitären Staat