CHAPTER SIX

RELIGIOUS SOCIALIZATION IN A SECULAR ENVIRONMENT: JEHOOVAH’S WITNESSES IN EASTERN GERMANY

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I have to heed one thing: that my children are important to me and the most important is what Jehovah says: that first of all in His house a child should learn the Truth, so above all I have to be here for my children. (Woman in her mid-forties, Saxony)

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses a vital problem for many religious movements: to increase their memberships and to retain their member’s children in the movement. I propose to analyze this issue in the rather unusual setting of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) which one of my interviewees, a Jehovah’s Witness in her mid-forties, born in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now again Chemnitz), Saxony characterized: “In our country, the GDR, there were almost no religious people; it was an atheist state; people were brought up that way.” These words of my interviewee, born in a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses, mother of nine children, are indeed true. Aside from the Czech Republic and Estonia, eastern Germany is considered to be the most secularized country in Europe (Pollack 2002; Pollack 2003). During the forty years of the socialist regime some religious groups, such as Christian Scientists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Pentecostals, were banned and their members were subject to surveillance and persecutions. Although ever since the country’s unification, the political situation of the Protestant and Catholic churches as well as smaller religious communities has changed, this has not, however, resulted in a general religious revival (Pollack 2000). In this respect, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who are the focus of this article, are to be considered exceptional. Taking into account the number of active Witnesses (“Publishers”) at the beginning and end of the GDR and the high scale of persecution, it is safe to say that the policy of the State Security (or Stasi) was not fulfilled. Witnesses were
By comparison, the total population in Saxony was almost 4,300,000 in 2004, with Protestants accounting for 21.5 percent and Catholics 3.6 percent of the population (Statistisches Jahrbuch Sachsen 2005). There are roughly 163,000 in Germany as a whole.

This religious movement is interesting for several reasons. First of all, along with the United States and Britain, Germany is one of the “traditional heartlands” of Jehovah’s Witnesses. In Germany, Jehovah’s Witnesses, initially known as Ernste Bibelforscher (Bible Students, until 1931), were active from 1903 when the first German branch office was established in Elberfeld, now part of the city of Wuppertal. The founder of the organization, Charles Taze Russell, visited Saxony (Dresden and Leipzig) as early as in 1891, during his first trip to Europe. He would later return to hold sermons in Germany between 1909 and 1911. On April 10, 1914, 13 Jehovah’s Witnesses took part in their annual Memorial of Christ in Chemnitz, 29 in Leipzig, and 103 in Dresden.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses are probably the best known new religious movement in Germany (Fincke and Twisselmann 2005, 534). The reason for this is not so much the number of active members but rather the public evangelizing that they practice. According to the Society’s own statistics in Saxony there are 13,262 publishers (01.2007). Chemnitz (known as Karl-Marx-Stadt from 1953–1990) and the surrounding Chemnitzer Land, where I conducted thirteen months of fieldwork between 2006 and 2007, is considered to have the highest density of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Germany (0.54%), and was one of the main centers of Witness in the GDR (Dennis 2006; Hacke 2000).

Although the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in comparison to the Protestant and Catholic churches had been rather small, they were persecuted not only in the Third Reich, but also in the German Democratic Republic. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were banned in the GDR (August 1950), but received legal recognition as a religious organization from the state in March 1990, several months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to Hans-Hermann Dirksen (2006), a

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2 The persecutions in the Third Reich go beyond the scope of this paper. According to Hacke (2000; cf. Besier and Vollnhals 2003; H.-H. Dirksen 2002), there were about 25,000 Bibelforscher in Germany in 1933, of which some 10,000 were persecuted by the Nazis.