

Preface: What is identity development?

Identity development is comprised of more than conscious contemplation; there are subconscious interactions with identity that coincide with the more recognizable choices an individual makes regarding his or her maturation. One way to understand these subconscious realizations is through the lens of psychoanalysis. Erik Erikson was a leader of psychological theory, particularly with regards to development. Throughout life, one undergoes many changes and levels of understanding to move forth. Erikson provides stages of development broken into age groups, labeled the “Eight Psychosocial Stages of Development.” Each stage indicates a turning point, in which an individual undergoes a psychosocial crisis. Erikson points out that

It is only after a reasonable sense of identity has been established that real intimacy with others can be possible. The youth who is not sure of his or her identity shies away from interpersonal intimacy, and can become, as an adult, isolated, or lacking in spontaneity, warmth or the real exchange of fellowship in relationship to others; but the surer the person becomes of their self, the more intimacy is sought in the form of friendship, leadership, love and inspiration. The counterpart to intimacy is distancing, which is the readiness to repudiate those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one’s own. (Erikson 101)

One undergoes the struggle of *Identity vs. Role Confusion* between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, typically encountering an Erikson-coined “identity crisis.” This important stage marks the breakthrough transition between adolescence and adulthood (Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development). I fall in the middle of this age grouping, and it seems that I fit the description, for I am trying to gain a sense of self by questioning “Who am I?”

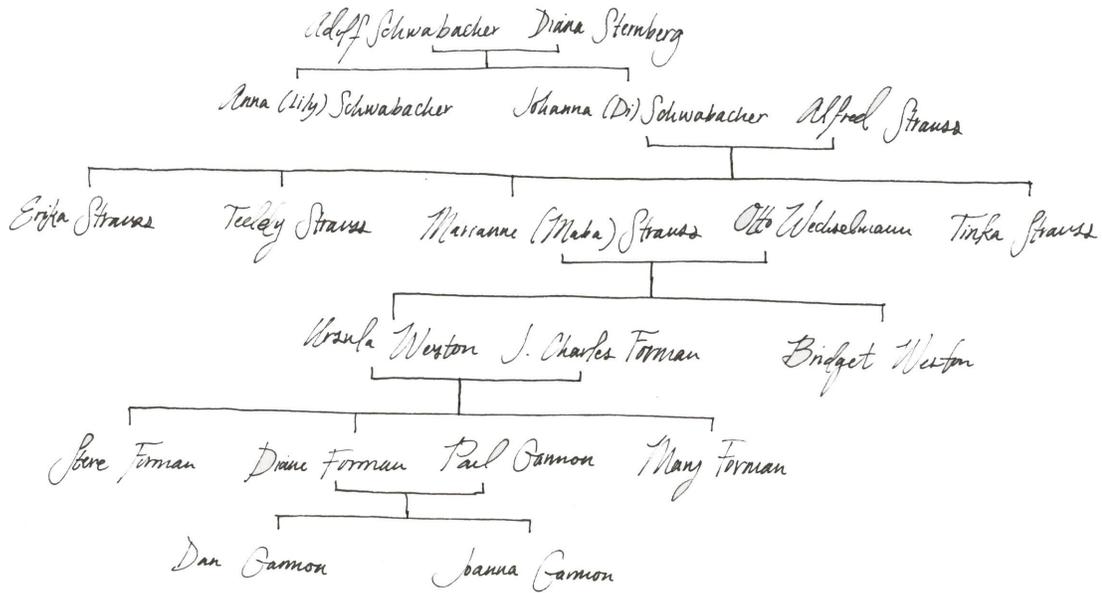
Identity development is classified in multiple ways. James Marcia was another leader in psychological categorization, as he separated stages of identity development into four realms: *identity diffusion*, *identity foreclosure*, *identity moratorium*, and *identity achievement*. Although Erikson suggests that identity formation occurs predominantly between ages 13-19, Marcia’s theory applies to the lifetime of any given individual. *Identity diffusion* is a preliminary stage of identity development, in which the individual has given little thought to identity and has not yet established a direction in which to live his or her life. The next advancement is *identity foreclosure*, when the individual has “committed” to an identity, but somewhat hastily, without regard to what would best suit him/her. After this stage comes the classification *identity moratorium*. This crucial stage of development is trademarked by an identity crisis. The individual is actively seeking answers to self-posed questions about his/her life. Finally, there is *identity achievement*, when the individual has resolved issues by making commitments to his/her goals, beliefs, and values (Oswalt).

Currently, I am vigorously posing questions that reveal details about myself and my ways of thinking that may not have been apparent previously. Are my beliefs my own, or are they a direct byproduct of being raised in my family? How much impact does geography have on my beliefs? Has everyone in my family undergone an “identity crisis” like this?

I am floating in space... I am unknown to myself. On the surface, I am Joanna. I have an age, I belong to a state of America, I have a loving family. I am caring, studious, passionate, honest, petite, thoughtful... I am described by these aspects of my life, but every individual is more broadly defined by his or her unique identity-- a term that is widely used with very little backing or support. What makes up an "identity"? An overwhelming task to understand who I am is that of delving into the terms that compose identity. I am defined by "a whole"-- but am also composed of distinct and comprehensible components. "Identity" is commonly comprised of subcategories, like culture, ethnicity, nationality, heritage, and religion. Conversely, an individual's identity could be determined by goals, beliefs, and values. However, I am not sure of my relationship to any of the previously listed terms. I have never felt any sort of cultural association, be it American, German, Russian or the like. When people ask my ethnicity, my response is typically, "Mostly German and Russian, a bit Lithuanian-- maybe an eighth or so." My nationality is American, but I do not feel culturally tied to America. I lack a conventional form of religion. I am brought back time and time again to the most defining feature of myself: family. I yearn to understand how identity is shaped by family heritage through deciphering some of the mysteries of my past. Until this point, my heritage has been a blur.

Who are my ancestors?

I have chosen to look primarily into my maternal lineage for several reasons. Fundamentally, it is the side to which I can access the most information. The second and equally prevalent reason is that I have a significantly closer relationship with my mother's side of the family. My immediate family has been less connected with my father's family for much of my life. My paternal relatives have had very little impact on the way I am, though I would be interested in exploring these relationships more profoundly in the future.



My research dates back several generations, to my great-great grandparents on my mother's mother's mother's side. My relatives at the time were the Schwabacher/Strauss family, inhabiting areas near Berlin, Germany such as Im dol, Wannsee, and Dahlem. They lived a rather wealthy lifestyle at the turn of the 20th century. German Jewish culture guided many of their beliefs: they highly valued education, they prized family life, and worked hard. Many German Jews were thriving at the time, achieving wealth through industry and commerce. They also comprised a large percentage of participants in the law and medicinal fields (*Assimilation of Jews in Weimar Germany*). During a time of growing political and economic turmoil, my great great grandparents, Johanna (Di) Schwabacher and Alfred Strauss, were thriving as they extended their family. They birthed four children: Erika, Ted, Marianne (Maba), and Tinka.

In the turbulent times predating the first World War¹, my family spent much time in Wannsee, a borough of Berlin, where they were able to sustain their extravagant lifestyle. The Strausses employed an English nanny, from whom the eldest two children would become bilingual. Summers in Wannsee were opulently spent tossing tennis balls, putting croquet, and pony-riding.

¹ As Germany sought greater world power and influence, tensions between European superpowers were growing, particularly those with Austria-Hungary, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, as well as the Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy.



Adolf Strauss had a house built specifically for the children in the summer months. The garden was also important at the house in Wannsee. The Strauss family had close relationships with their service workers... their gardener, nannies, cooks, and maids. I was previously unaware of the extensive wealth in my family generations ago. However, these riches were not perpetuated throughout the next turn of events in Germany, particularly once religion became a definitive aspect of life.

My ancestors were never religious, though they were impacted heavily by technicalities. My great grandmother and her siblings, though technically Jewish, were all baptized and converted to Protestantism in the early 20th century to better integrate into German society. This was very common at the time, as “the extent of Jewish assimilation by 1930 was such that in language, dress, and lifestyle, thousands of Jews looked and acted like the Germans among whom they lived.” Despite Jewish efforts to assimilate, Germans still identified them as “alien.” There remained a boundary between “wanting to be completely assimilated and feeling the security of being completely accepted.” (*Assimilation of Jews in Weimar Germany, 1919- 1933*). As a result of desire for assimilation, Jewish conversion to Protestantism was popular at the time (*Relatively Relatives Growing Up in Disturbing Times*). My ancestors had no affiliation with the church, apart from baptisms-- church attendance was never important. Christianity was merely a means to an end, one that would allow my family to achieve their goals of blending in. This would not be the last time thoughts of conformity and assimilation would linger in their minds.

By this point, international tensions were present, as a result of massive industrial expansion and economic growth worldwide, prompting the outbreak of World War I. Several of my ancestors participated in the Great War, which led them to believe they were invincible in the scope of Anti-Semitism. More German Jews fought in World War I than any other group of people in Germany, whether ethnic, religious, or otherwise (*Die Judischen Gefallenen*). However, service to Germany in this time of disturbance did not aid as a barrier from religious persecution, as became evident in years to come.



First Lieutenant Alfred Strauss and wife, Diana Schwabacher

The Strauss children grew up, and were soon wed to a diverse group of individuals, not solely of German nationality. My great grandmother, Maba, married a German man by the name of Otto Wechselmann, head of a German manufacturing company. The Wechselmanns were well-off and well-educated, similar to the Schwabacher/Strauss family. Otto's family was also born Jewish, baptized, and converted to Protestantism. Otto never associated with a religion, and recalled:

[My parents] like myself were Protestants, but that many of our relatives were Jewish, that all of our forebears had been Jewish, that I should not partake in anti-Jewish remarks by some Protestants, but that the whole issue of different faiths was of minor importance and should not bother me. (Otto Remembers 16)

His remarks resonate with me for several reasons, primarily because of the last sentence. This statement supports my family's separation from religion through the generations, until present day. I feel that Otto's recollections apply to my life as well-- while I am not technically Protestant, and my parents do not dictate my thoughts regarding religion, I feel this way by choice. I feel no affiliation with any sort of religion, and am not concerned with conflicts between spiritualities.

While Otto and Maba did not associate religiously, they shared similar philosophies of life, backgrounds and interests, and six weeks after meeting at a ball intended for learning to dance and mingling (but very rarely anything more than "friendships that were strictly platonic"), announced their engagement. The newlyweds eventually moved into a nice neighborhood in

Dahlem, where they would raise two children: my grandmother, Ursula, and my great aunt Bridget.

As the family was settling in, the state of Germany took a drastic turn for the worse. Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and projected a nationalist message that appealed to many people. All parties but the Nazi party dissolved, and Anti-Semitism became increasingly prevalent. The Nazi government then implemented the Laws of Nuremberg, which declared any individual with three or more Jewish grandparents a Jew, regardless of baptism (USHMM The Nuremberg Race Laws). Thus, Otto and Maba could no longer rely on their sheltered life disregarding faiths. Within an instant, religion became one of the most defining features in their lives and severely impacted decision-making from then on.

Societal implications were not the sole problem for Jews, as financial repercussions became apparent after Kristallnacht, when the German Nazis attacked Jewish people and property, specifically massacring synagogues and shops. Many Jews were arrested after this “night of the broken glass,” which ended the possibility of Jewish survival in Germany. The Nazi government imposed a large fine on Jews, which required them to pay for the damage, and forced Jewish people to clean up the destruction (Berenbaum). Otto and Maba, in the face of this adversity, realized their need to flee Germany. The government imposed a fine on Jews, which required the Wechseldmanns to pay a 40% estate tax. In addition, Otto tried to sell his business, but was unable, as other Germans were hesitant to buy Jewish companies. Instead, Otto transferred it to his uncle, who came to Berlin specifically for this purpose. His uncle was Aryan, part of the “master race,” and would be able to give shares back to Otto later, after he left Germany. However, the money was never recovered, and left the family worse off-- but not penniless. “The problem was to find a country, that would offer refuge, until [their] US immigration visas would arrive” (Otto Remembers 36).

In the interim, my family spent a year in England, where the girls attended school and became fluent in English. When one “dump[s] Germans into an English setting, it’s either sink or swim. When you’re the only German-speaking children, after a year in England, you know English” (Ursula Forman).

Just as life was moving along smoothly, my family’s plans for immigration were interrupted. Otto was exiled to the Isle of Man, as he was “considered an enemy alien” (Weston 11). Otto describes the harsh life of a prisoner with an indifferent, if not surprisingly positive, outlook. He makes several remarks that signify his deep thinking during his internment.

It is a peculiar life, that a prisoner lives, and I do not consider it a completely worthless experience. It brings out human behaviour in its most natural form. The best and the worst in man becomes apparent.

I am certain, that one must have gone through an experience like this, to fully understand the frustration and despair of people, who can not see a way out of their misery. They may easily reach a stage, when law and order become meaningless in the face, of what is being done to the miracle called life.

(Weston 11, 16)

After losing so much, it is hard to imagine how one could sustain a positive attitude; however, Otto's ability to reflect upon philosophical themes reflected his strong nature. His attitude was passed on through generations (or at least to his children)-- my mother recalls her grandmother and mother saying "you must pull yourself up by your bootstraps; in other words, don't wallow in your own self-pity. Think of someone other than yourself" (Diane Forman Garmon). I wonder how much of this mindset has been lost through the following generations... my mother and myself. In my experience, much emphasis is given to self-exploration. This was not the case for my relatives, perhaps as a result of their Germanic upbringing or personalities.

In addition to philosophical contemplation, Otto was put to work constructing stretchers (as he was knowledgeable of the industry because of his business in Germany). As he was becoming accustomed to life isolated from his family, Otto learned of his fortunate attainment of American visas for himself and his family.

With visas in hand, my ancestors' passage to America was swift. Virtually everyone was safe, with the exception of Otto's mother, Gisela, who perished in Treblinka², and Maba's sister, Erika, who remained in hiding throughout the Holocaust in the Netherlands. (She later arrived in America safely.)

Religion, which had never been prominent in any of my relatives' lives, became the driving force of change. The term "religion" and direct classification forced my ancestors to abandon a quaint life in Germany and restart life in America, where new problems would be presented.

² Treblinka was a German concentration camp in the Holocaust. The Germans deported around 265,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka, as well as from multiple other places. They also deported some 8,000 Jews from Theresienstadt (where Gisela was previously kept) in Bohemia to Treblinka.

How did coming to America influence my family's culture?

Upon arrival to Ellis Island, the Wechselmann family, consisting of Otto, Maba, Ursula, and Bridget, was quick to adopt an Americanized last name. After flipping through a phonebook, looking for traditionally American surnames, my family chose to be known as the "Weston" family. All they wanted was to be American. America presented new opportunities regarding occupation, education and social status. German was not to be spoken once they were settled. This would interfere, and immediately point them out as foreigners. There was never a reason to discuss their background. The question of religion never came about, for they hid their German Jewish backgrounds. They found solace in a white, Christian town in the Chicago area, where comfort was found in dropping their past.

For the children, it was never much of a problem trying to fit in with American children. My grandmother claims her heritage, being both German and technically Jewish, "was never a serious issue" (Ursula Forman). It did not interfere with the simple life of a child in the early to mid-20th century, whereas it may have caused slightly larger societal implications and problems for my great grandparents, whose friends in America were mostly German and/or Jewish. My mother recalls, "I remember them saying they never felt truly American" (Diane Forman Garmon).

This sentiment brings me back to one of my original questions, regarding nationality. What is "Americanism"? One of the (only) reasons I am proud to be American is for its wide range of diversity. In the past, the goal was to be American. Now, we are leaning in the opposite direction by prizing our past, our culture, and embracing our differences from a young age.

In current school settings, fitting in seems to be a much greater deal. Much attention is given to inclusion based on race and gender. While it is important to recognize the differences among people and embrace diversity, we emphasize creating a stable elementary community, minimizing bullying due to differences, which may be creating more problems than before. Fifty years ago, this type of prevention was not such a concern. With little emphasis on the topic of bullying, bullying was never an issue. My grandmother recalls "children didn't need to fit in. They just did. Not much attention was given to children's feelings then. Parents were uninvolved with school" (Ursula Forman).

On the other hand, my upbringing has significantly been different. My parents have been actively involved in my schooling-- forming relationships with my teachers, investigating my performance-- as well as every other aspect of my development. I have much more of a say in the way I am raised, in comparison to my grandmother and my mother. I listen to my parents, but I voice my opinions and constantly question the present, past, and future.

Did my family hide information about their past in America, and more important, why?

While I may question my family's choice to hide their heritage, they did not view it as "hiding." Their Germanic nature explained their stoicism and unwillingness to share too much. While stereotypical, there are certainly Germanic personality traits that apply in my family, like

being stubborn, argumentative, and stick-to-it-iveness (The Seven Personality Traits of a German). I find it fascinating that one can live somewhere so long and never allude to the details about his or her past. America offered a new world for opportunity, and my relatives wanted nothing to stand in their way.

I will never know the exact thoughts of my family at the time, but I can inform my inquiries through the nature of secrecy. At this point, it becomes necessary to distinguish secrecy from privacy. Secrecy involves an active attempt to prevent access to information, whereas privacy is much more general. It depends on perspective whether to classify my family's situation as being past the nature of privacy or not.

A part of secrecy is self-concealment and repression; these tools are used in order to keep distressing or negative personal information from others, as well as out of an individual's conscious mind. Both self-concealment and repression would seem to benefit the newly assimilating individual in America, such as my great grandparents. During World War II, when my family first arrived in the U.S., Americans often viewed Germans in a negative light. I regret my family's self-concealment, but in the given context, it was fitting. They believed that a veil over their past allowed them a smoother transition into American life.

However, my great grandparents' confidentiality was not solely amongst their new American neighbors-- they maintained a furtive lifestyle within our family, including my mother and her siblings. My grandmother never overtly expressed the reason for her family's need to leave Germany. My mother knew on the surface, as I had for so long, that my grandmother came to America in her early childhood, but it was not until her late teens that my mother learned the reality of the situation. Unlike my disconnect from the past, for which I blame my lack of interest, my mother felt separation because of her family's unwillingness to reveal information.

My mother felt like her heritage *was* a secret. She felt uncomfortable in the town in which she grew up, recollecting its sameness, in terms of people and culture. It was not until my great grandparents grew old that they became willing to share some of the details of their experiences. It would have been a shame to lose so much knowledge for the sake of fitting in as a true "American." My mother unexpectedly learned of her past, after finding her mother's yellow Star of David in a beaten wooden trunk, when packing to move. She felt "like [she] was living a lie." After being raised unreligiously, as generations in the past had been for so long, my mother felt a new affinity to Jewish people, and was drawn to the projected messages of Judaism. "It felt like a huge family secret, and once I learned of my family's past, things made more sense--like part of life was filled in" (Diane Forman Garmon). However, once married to my father, who actively practiced Judaism, she attended temple for several years, and realized her connection to Judaism was not religious, but cultural.

As I can see now, the values to which my mother was drawn-- education, family, hard work, ritual and connection to the past -- like my ancestors, are prominent in my daily life. I strongly connect with these principles. While I may not directly classify these elements of my life as "religion", nor did my relatives, yet these values certainly compose a great deal of my being, and in turn, my identity.

How is my crisis different from previous generations?

Introspection has grown to be a defining characteristic in my life that has allowed me to explore deep into my past in regard to its relationship with my present.

I am now able to see my good fortune being born into this generation. This emphasis on adolescent consciousness of identity development and exploration is a rather new phenomenon; while reflecting upon past generations, one recognizes the divergence in a child's role in family life in modern day (or at least in my family). It is doubtful that I would be going through the same thought process had I been born fifty years ago. In fact, I know I would not, for I have a domain of opportunity available to me that was unbeknownst to relatives my senior. Looking at the past and future was unusual for relatives like my grandmother. She states "we never did it, and that was that" (Ursula Forman). When she was a child, she truly lived the life of a child, unconcerned with future or past preoccupations. A child's life in modern context is remarkably different-- we are encouraged to trace our roots, plan for the future, and think deliberately about our relationships with the world around us. As we continue living in the world's melting pot, we further distance ourselves from history. I feel fortunate to be a part of a generation that is concerned with lineage and connections, in the scope of identity exploration.

This ability to reflect upon my past is a privilege; however, I believe it interferes somewhat with the natural progression of adolescence. Though it is an established psychological stage of development, I think one loses a sense of her carefree childhood through this sort of internal contemplation. As we advance through life, we contemplate our roles in society and in our daily interactions. Although in the past, my relatives technically grew up faster by marrying younger and assuming adult-like responsibilities at a younger age, they mentally progressed at a natural rate in their childhood as a result of their subconscious protection from reflection, examination, and drawing connections to their present states of being.

By simply looking at my past, I have gained a sense of "identity." I have given up trying to categorize myself. Aspects of life are too overarching to be contained. Generationally, our roles in society change immensely; each generation learns from the previous. The way I have been raised has been primarily as the result of the way my parents were raised. One makes decisions based on her own experiences. My grandmother's experiences informed the way she raised my mother, which in turn impacted the decisions my mother made in my life. In several years, I will be faced with making similar choices about my future.

While I have found no answers to my original questions regarding broad terms like "cultural and ethnic identity", I am left with something greater: learning the history of my past has allowed me to discover more about my form of introspection and ability to make connections that will prompt me to continuously question the present.

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