

## Chapter Two

### THE GIERKE BROTHERS

While the young Zacharias was struggling to establish his publishing firm in the south west of Germany much further north, in the city of Stettin, the other branch of the family grew up.

We can trace the Gierke family tree a long way back. A great-great grandmother, Wihelmine, born in Stettin in 1775 and married in 1799 wrote names and dates into a little book that she had been given as a wedding present. She married Friedrich Samuel Gierke who was by then a member of the third generation after an ancestor had arrived in that area from Bohemia early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Friedrich was a shopkeeper selling fabrics with special emphasis on silk. He owned a shop at the market place. He and Wihelmine had twelve children of which eight survived. Rudolf Eduard **Julius** Gierke was the sixth child born in 1807 [three years before Zacharias]. Obviously the shopkeeper was doing well because this son was sent to school and then university. The progress this young man made was exceptional. He attended the gymnasium [i.e. secondary school] in Stettin. Reports of his work in the classes from the last four or five years of his school career have been found, all of which show that he was a very able student. He then attended university and graduated from the university of Heidelberg with PhD in law in 1830. Again the time corresponds closely with Zacharias's graduation date in 1833.

As a reward Julius was allowed to undertake an extensive trip that could be traced from his passport issued in Heidelberg. From this we can even get a picture of the man: 1,78m tall, well built, a healthy oval face, a blond beard but reddish hair, grey eyes and healthy teeth. The passport allows us to follow his travels very accurately. He was away for two and a half months and we can gather from his letters that he much enjoyed this trip.



*Copy of a painting of  
Julius Gierke*

Back home he proceeded to prepare himself to enter the civil service. It was then that he met the beautiful Therese. Born on 19 September 1809 she was the daughter of Karl Wilhelm Zitelmann [1777-1844]. He was a judge, or law advisor, and a much-respected man in Stettin. The fact that Julius was allowed to ask

for the hand of the daughter of this house, speaks well for him. I think I never quite understood the significance of the Zitelmann family in our history until I studied this background of our ancestors.

It is a remarkable family and a glance at the professions reveals that members of this family became envoys, judges and ministers attached to the court as well authors and poets. How they influenced the Gierke family will soon become clear.



*Copy of a painting of  
Therese Gierke*

Therese was a lovely creature, much spoilt and loved by parents and brothers. She was easily moved to tears and was sentimental and romantically inclined. They became engaged on 30 December 1837 but Julius was called to Berlin early in 1838 where he took some exams, which he passed very well. Both he and Therese seem to have had a very active social life - she recorded in her diary constant appointments with friends: tea parties, visiting concerts and art galleries. Julius had a painting or drawing made of himself for her and this was received with tears of joy. They were married in 1839.

Again we note the parallel to the Löwenthal family - Zacharias and Anna were married in 1838.

After their marriage the young Gierkes first settled in a small apartment in Stettin and led an active social life. Their family and friends teased them about the lack of space. It appears that at this stage Julius became involved in politics. He was elected to a municipal or provincial office with 59 votes against three. The next ten to twelve years were probably not very easy for the spoilt, and perhaps physically not very strong, Therese. In that time she bore seven children, one of whom died at an early age. The eldest son, Otto, was born in 1841 and the youngest, Walter, in 1854. In the few letters available it appears that illnesses and other difficulties caused many complaints so that both her mother and her husband had to be very persuasive at times.

It appears that Julius was elected to be a delegate and was then called to be a minister

in the government, which meant that the young family moved to Berlin. They enjoyed living in Berlin but missed family in Stettin and often returned during holidays. Then came a move to Bromberg

close to the Polish border as it was described as ‘out of this world’. Bromberg might well have been part of Poland at some time because when Walter, the youngest child, was born there the family teased Therese by calling him a ‘Pollack’. This annoyed her and she defended her baby by saying that he would always remain a true German. No one could predict what was to happen to that part of the country sixty-four years later – events that would be of major importance to Walter Gierke.

The family did a great amount of travelling and it may well have been exhausting for the delicate Therese if much of it was by coach and then latterly by train. The pictures of both Therese and Julius give us some idea of what they looked like. It is remarkable that he is at that stage had no beard. It is good that these paintings were done, and copied, as their existence makes us much more aware of the lives of these great-grandparents. We grew up with these pictures – I remember them hanging in my parents’ room in Windhoek.

During the summer of 1855 the family were on holiday at a Zitelmann holiday home near Stettin. When the time drew to its close Julius and the two older boys travelled back to Bromberg while Therese and her younger children remained behind - no doubt to be spoilt a bit longer by the family. Letters that Julius wrote gave details of the journey and arrival back in Bromberg. However, in a subsequent letter there is mention of an approaching horror: cholera. The following is a translation of an extract written by Konrad von Gierke, [whom we knew as *Onkel* Konrad] written in 1975:

“Therese was suddenly recalled from her lovely holiday in Hoeckendorf to come to Bromberg where her husband was seriously ill. When she alighted at the station in Bromberg a delegation in black frock coats and top hats was there to meet her - Konrad presumed that they came from some judicial office - and it was their duty to inform her that her husband had already died. In her despair this sentimental, highly emotional and deeply shocked woman threw herself on the body of her beloved husband taking no notice of the dangerous, highly infectious disease. She became infected and died barely a week later of cholera - as her husband had done. Their two elder sons were at school in Bromberg and were suddenly orphans and the eldest, Otto 15 at the time, never quite overcame the

shock of this sudden loss. Even as an old man his grandchildren were never allowed to speak to him about his parents' death. The six children were taken in by Therese's sisters in Stettin and grew up on the estate Jasenitz. My father [Walter] who was nine months old at the time therefore never knew the love of his own mother".

It is at this stage that the importance of the Zitelmann family becomes evident. Otto, and probably all the children, was taken into the family by an uncle, brother to Therese, and his wife Ernstine. That the other children were also cared for by this family becomes evident when we realise that certain names appear in the next generation. There was never any doubt that my third name was that of my aunt [we knew her as *Tante Tina*] and that she was obviously named after this aunt in Stettin. Otto's daughter Hilda told of the close connection the family had to the Zitelmann family and how every year at Christmas a cake arrived from their *Tante Tine*.

The influence of the cultured and well-educated Zitelmann family, however, went much further than mere creature comforts as this uncle saw to it that Otto completed his studies and sent him to university. At the age of not yet 20 he completed his thesis for the PhD. His academic career was interrupted several times as he was called to defend his country in 1866 and again in the Franco- Prussian war of 1870-71. He was awarded the Iron Cross when peace was declared in 1871.

Back in civilian life he pursued his academic career. Numerous writings soon made his name famous. He is best described as a legal philosopher who helped to formulate many laws for the new *Reich*. His interests and studies covered many other fields, though, and included theology, philosophy, history and literature. As an academic he spent several years lecturing at various universities - Breslau 1872 -1884, Heidelberg 1884 -1887 and thereafter Berlin where he remained till his death in 1921.

Soon after the Franco-Prussian war he followed a call to the Breslau University. He spent a holiday in the Swiss Alps and it was here that he met Lili Loening, daughter of the publisher, by then known as Carl Loening, and sister to Edgar. After barely two weeks they became engaged in September 1887 and were married in the April of the following year. Their children loved the story of their romance and were told by a peasant woman how the gay young Lili flew across the hills like a little bird.

Neither of the two families, the Loenings in Frankfurt nor the Gierkes/ Zitelmanns in Stettin, was particularly charmed with the alliance of these two young people. Although the war of 1870 had brought about the German empire [the second German *Reich*] the traditional, ingrained attitudes

about the Prussian north and the democratic south had in no way disappeared. The Germans of the south thought of Stettin far distant in the north and the 'northerners' thought of Frankfurt beyond the pale.

However, Lili visited Stettin and with her charming ways won over the family without much trouble while Otto must have impressed his future father-in-law with his reliability. Hilda records that they as children regarded this marriage as exemplary and ideal.

Just a few highlights from the life of this Gierke family which make the whole story more human and not just a historical record. There were six children, three boys and three girls and all made their mark on the Germany before 1933. Sadly the youngest son Otto died soon after end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War in 1918 - a victim of the flu that killed so many in that year.

The third daughter Hilda is the one who wrote about her father and most of the details quoted above are from her pen. The life of her parents was dedicated to work and family. While Otto devoted his life to science and teaching, Lili considered it her task to make his life as easy as possible for him so that he could fully devote himself to his studies. He was filled with high ideals, which she shared with him, but she regarded the daily practical matters as her duty. She made sure that he lived healthily and insisted on a regular lifestyle. He disliked having a meal without her and should she not be at home when he arrived home he was devastated and the daughters were only a very poor substitute.

Hilda stresses that the simple and somewhat Spartan up-bringing of the children - cold showers, hard beds, the more than adequate, but simple food - would all have contributed to the fact that in later life each of the children had healthy bodies and

were able to cope with many often difficult situations in life. They certainly all lived through the two wars and died in old age.

The twelve years that the family spent in Breslau were among the happiest for the family. The children were born there and amongst the academics the parents found many lifelong friends. Servants assisted the expanding household. The children were a lively crowd and an extract from a letter by grandfather Carl Loening in November 1881 written to his son Edgar, in Dorpat at the time, records:

“Just now little Hilda crawled into the room and wanted to get on to my lap. She is a splendid specimen. A little female Hercules.... Today as the other children are not at home, there is wonderful peace and quiet so that I have to ask myself if I really am in the Gierke home. Generally at this time - about 5 o'clock - when all the children are together - be it for food or play in the nursery, then the ears and nerves of any one not involved are tested, and he would do best to get away as far as possible from this hellish noise”.

Nanna, the eldest, would not yet have been six at that time and there were two younger boys and one little girl apart from Hilda who at the time of the letter was not quite one year old, so it's not surprising that it was noisy. What a lovely little glimpse of the humour and affection for his grandchildren this reveals!

After three years in Heidelberg that the children remembered as blissful because of the nearby forest, but not as easy for Otto, the family moved to Berlin. For a while they lived in rented apartments until the big event for the family when they moved into a house in Charlottenburg in 1890. The parents themselves designed this house in that area, at that time not yet built up - though it was to change quite rapidly. At the time, however, the streets were as yet unnamed and unnumbered. Soon, though, it became *Carmenstrasse 17*. And this house was to be the centre for so many of this widespread family for many years to come. [I have a vague memory of having visited there in 1939 and can hardly remember the aunts Nanna and Hilda but know that we met Rolf (one of the grandchildren) there.] Our parents occupied part of the house for a time in the 1920s. I will come back to the significance of this house after 1933. If I have described the life of this family in detail then it is because I have the material available. I can only hope that it serves as a model to the other families especially the family of Lili's brother, Edgar Loening and his wife Marie.

Otto Gierke's youngest brother, Walter, must have spent much of his young years in the home of the family. Four years younger than Lili, his sister-in-law, he had a great admiration and affection for her. It is hardly surprising that when he got married he praised her and would hold her and her housekeeping up as an ideal to his wife, Luise. That she for many years bore a grudge against the name Loening is, under these circumstances, quite understandable.

Hilda records that at an early age Walter displayed a particular leaning towards, ability for, and interest in, agriculture and farming. He spent some time at an agricultural training institution in Halle, was employed as an inspector (administrator) on various estates until with the help of his brother's finances he could acquire a property that he called *Deutschwalde*, in eastern Germany in the Province of Posen. Here he could start his own farming career. His widowed sister and her daughter were there to housekeep for him and in later life he said that these years were among the happiest of his life.

In a brief sketch of his father's life, his son, Konrad von Gierke, mentioned how Walter and Luise met. He was 40 when he happened to be in *Schlesien* (Silesia) to purchase some wood when he met Luise Schwedler, the eldest daughter of a Prussian railway inspector and his wife Laura. She was his junior by fourteen years. It probably was a short courtship and in March 1894 they were married in *Schlesien* and he brought his bride back to his home. Konrad said that his father Walter was a man who loved his homely comforts. He described Walter's wedding as a highlight in his life after he had been a bachelor for so long. The couple spent another three very happy years at *Deutschwalde* during which time the two eldest boys were born.



In 1897 Walter, on the advice of an acquaintance who was aware of estates changing owners fairly frequently, acquired a large estate, Polanowitz, also in the province of Posen. Ironically this province was part of the territory that Germany was obliged to cede to Poland at the Treaty of Versailles after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. So it was that Therese's baby of 1854 did live in Poland although I don't think he ever adopted

Polish nationality. The story of what happened to his sons and their lives in Poland belongs to another chapter.

Polanowitz – how many memories we have of that beautiful property! So many of our mother’s tales of her early life there were connected with the place. And I can remember the weeks Walter and I spent there in 1933 while Marie was sent to England and our mother had to sell and pack up the house in Berlin. And even clearer are the memories of 1939 when we spent perhaps two months there before we were warned to get back to Windhoek as soon as possible. But that too is part of a later chapter, as are the days before we emigrated in 1933.

I am so grateful that there are some pictures of Polanowitz available because they explain it all so much better than words do. In the records available it is stated that by 1910 Walter Gierke was one of the wealthiest landowners of the area. At that time the house was rebuilt and became the splendid building that appears in the picture. At that time Walter was elevated into the Prussian nobility. It is amusing that the newspaper, the *Kujawische Bote* of Hohensalza, noted this fact on 20 August 1910 and used the English phrase ‘a self made man’ to describe him. The newspaper then added that his brother, the well-known professor Otto Gierke, was present at this ceremony and mention was made of the fact that



*The front entrance of the house, with (probably) Monica Kienitz and Walter von Gierke*

Otto was celebrating his golden jubilee of his PhD graduation at the same time. The photograph of the two families was almost definitely taken on that occasion. Hilda made mention of the unforgettable day at Polanowitz when the jubilee was celebrated. [See photo on p.27]

She also related that due to Walter’s efficiency and capabilities he could purchase a second property and was thus able to form a *Majorat*. According to the

encyclopaedia that meant that at his death his property would pass to his eldest son. Marie thinks that it might have something to do with the elevation to the nobility. That meant that he could insert the word *von* before his surname. It is, I think, very similar to the British title 'Sir'. Apparently Walter Gierke was awarded this because he had done so much to advance the cause of German culture in that part of the country. At that time - prior to 1914 - it was of course part of the German Reich.

The exact date was August 1910 and I remember our mother telling me that Walter was awarded his title prior to Otto. Hilda seemed to indicate that it was less likely for Otto as an academic to be awarded this honour than the landowner, but he did get it a year later. She added that it was an even a greater honour for Otto as academics were not usually awarded this honour. Whatever the reasons for this honour were then, is immaterial today but I think that at the time the two families were quietly proud of their title.

It is interesting that our mother was allowed to have all her trousseau and cutlery initialled EvG. She also told me that the family frowned upon a young woman engaged to her eldest brother, Hans, who had the brass to use the title on her trousseau before they were married. It was very obviously not done! (The engagement was broken, but I do not know if that was the cause!) The custom of using the maiden name may well be to establish that these things brought into the marriage were hers. Again this is irrelevant in today's world but of interest when we see the cutlery engraved with EvG and some of the linen that has those initials embroidered, still exists. Walter and his wife Hilary enjoy using the EvG cutlery. I was given silver cutlery set bearing the initials AL for Anna Loening that was left in Windhoek by *Tante* Anna, who of course was Edgar Loening's eldest child (my father's sister). Again in the Vorwerk home there is the cutlery engraved ML for Marie Loening, as that must have been acquired after the marriage of Marie to Edgar Loening.