

WIENER'S LIFE

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Wiener would have been extremely gratified had he known that the American Mathematical Society would honor him in death with an issue of the Bulletin. He had had a failing heart for many years and death had come to hold no fear for him, but the possibility of lack of esteem by his colleagues was most painful to him. Unfortunately Wiener did have grave doubts all of his professional life as to whether his colleagues, especially in the United States, valued his work, and, unwarranted as these doubts were, they were very real and disturbing to him.

Wiener wrote a two-volume autobiography entitled *Ex-prodigy* and *I am a mathematician* thereby giving posterity an unusually detailed and personal picture of himself, his family, his colleagues, his times and of how he became a mathematician. It is of course an entirely honest but also entirely subjective account. Some of us come off too well, but in my opinion others are treated with a harshness that was not always warranted. Thus this article will not agree completely with Wiener's own account of the same people and events.

Norbert Wiener was born in Columbia, Missouri, November 26, 1894. His father, Leo Wiener, was a most remarkable man who had a tremendous influence on Norbert. Leo Wiener was born in Byelostok, in the ghetto area of Tsarist Russia, in 1862. He was a descendant of Aquiba Eger, Grand Rabbi of Posen from 1815 to 1837. He was also supposedly descended from Moses Maimonides. Leo Wiener's father had already broken with the ancient narrow Yiddish tradition of the ghetto and Leo was raised with literary German rather than Yiddish as his language. Whatever mixed feelings Norbert Wiener may have had as an adolescent on first realizing he was a Jew were completely gone when I met him in 1933. He was extremely proud of his scholarly ancestors and of the outstanding achievement of the Jews in mathematics, the physical and biological sciences and medicine. An account of his Jewish origin begins on the second page of *Ex-prodigy* [165]* and continues for a number of pages. He had an interesting theory to account for Jewish devotion to learning. It was in fact the case that a young man who was a good Talmudic scholar, no matter how poverty stricken or unworldly, was considered a good match for the daughter of even the wealthiest family.

* The bold-faced numbers in brackets refer to the numbered references in the Bibliography of Norbert Wiener.