



## **Pieter Dirk Uys' mother**

### **Helga Bassell**

#### **And her piano**

In 2004, the story emerged about Pieter Dirk Uys's mother. Born Jewish, she had hidden the fact from her family her entire life.

She was a concert pianist in Germany in the 1930s, and though she converted to Christianity, she nonetheless was subject to the same persecutions and exclusions as all Jews.

Born Helga Bassel in 1908 of Jewish parents - the daughter of a Viennese synagogue cantor - she had studied music in Berlin and bought the piano (a Bluthner) secondhand in 1930. Around that time, she was engaged to be married to a non-Jewish geologist.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, Bassel converted to Christianity, but her fiancé nonetheless came under pressure from Nazi authorities to break off the engagement. In 1935 Helga was expelled from Reich Music Chamber, an important professional body, and instead had been named as a member of the Reich Association of Non-Aryan Christians. Bassel had been classified under Nazi regulations as 'fully Jewish' and therefore to be persecuted in her profession.

Ultimately she fled Nazi Germany, taking her piano with her. She settled in South Africa in 1936 and lived and raised her children (Pieter and Tessa) as Afrikaans Christians. Tessa recalled, "I once said to my mother, 'I wish I had just a little Jewish blood in my veins like two Jewish girls I know,' "My mother said: 'You don't need Jewish blood. You have Afrikaner blood.' I think she said that to protect me after what she had been through in Germany." "... the issue of her mother's faith was not discussed at home.

Tessa Uys moved to London in 1967 to study at the Royal Academy of Music but returned frequently to South Africa, practicing on the Bluthner. After her father died in 1990 the house was rented to tenants, but the music room with its trove of Nazi-era documents was kept locked in her absences. And while she practiced for hours on the piano during her stays in South Africa, she did not choose to scrutinize the documents too closely. Overcoming her fear about what she might find, Tessa said, she became engrossed in her mother's papers and took documents with her to Berlin, where research conducted by the Jewish Museum established that her mother had been expelled from the Reich Music Chamber because she was Jewish.

That final disclosure, Tessa said, led her to the conclusion that the piano should be returned to Germany. At first the idea seemed daunting but then, she said, it became a form of catharsis.

"My life had been so involved with the piano. It had been a focal point of my life," she said, so the idea of parting with it seemed "like a shock, a wonderful shock, and then, a minute later, it seemed like a natural conclusion for the piano as it had come from Berlin."

"It was almost as if in the music room there was this secret that was never talked about," she said. "Now, through the piano, the secret has been defused."

(Acknowledging information from an article in the New York Times)