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WINTER 2024

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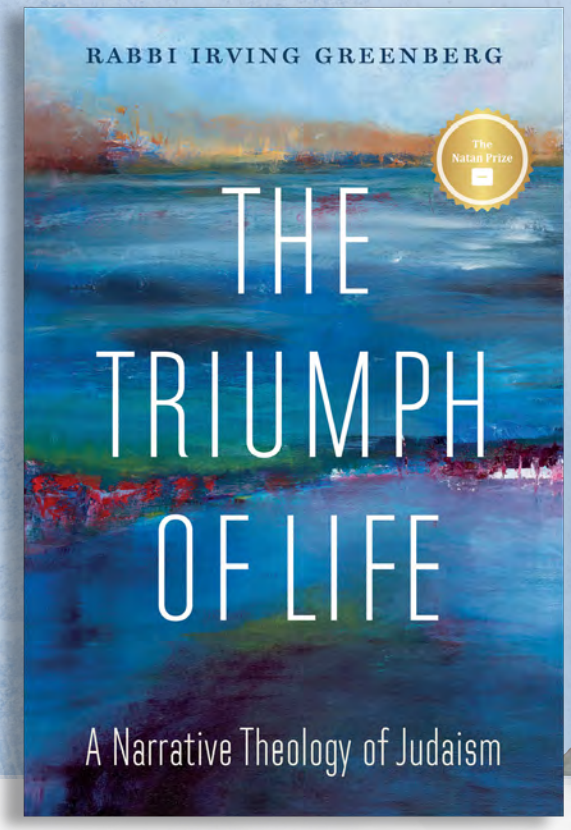

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The Conversion Issue

WINTER 2024

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Joanna Rubin Dranger. "Marilyn Monroe." In *Judiska Hjältinnor* ([Jewish Heroines], Natur & Kultur, 2024), 40.

Back Cover
Joanna Rubin Dranger. "Rut." In *Judiska Hjältinnor* ([Jewish Heroines], Natur & Kultur, 2024), 69.

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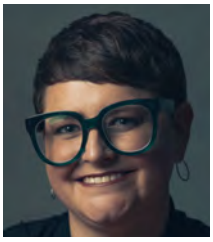
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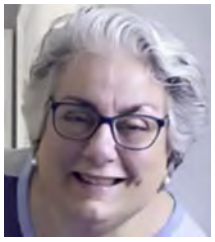
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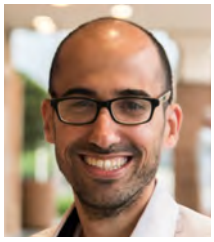
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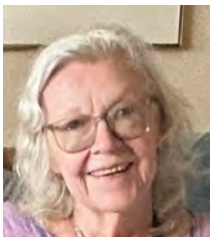
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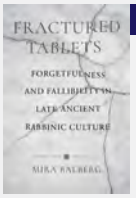

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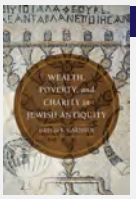

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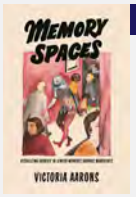

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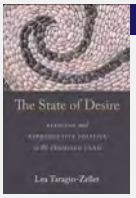

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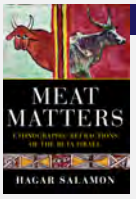

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"The Imaginary Geography of the Babylonian Talmud and the Production of Babylonia"

TZIPORA WEINBERG
New York University, Department of Hebrew & Judaic Studies

"Still Small Voices: The Development of Orthodox Thought and Practice by 'Lithuanian' Jewish Women, 1921–1945"

Finalists

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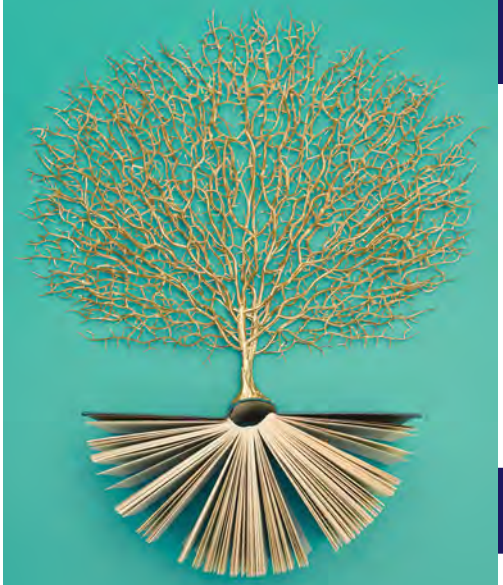

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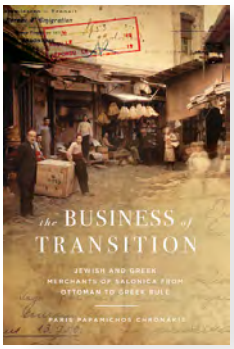

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Jewish and Greek Merchants of Salonica from Ottoman to Greek Rule

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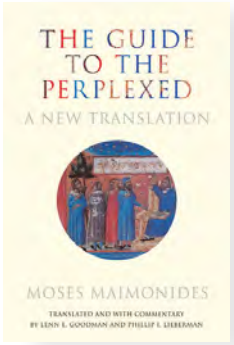

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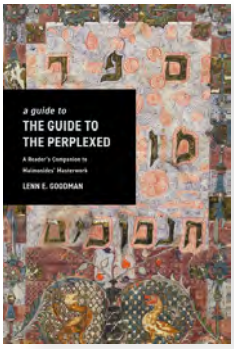
A New Translation

Moses Maimonides, Translated and with Commentary by Lenn E. Goodman and Phillip I. Lieberman



A Guide to *The Guide to the Perplexed*

A Reader's Companion to Maimonides' Masterwork

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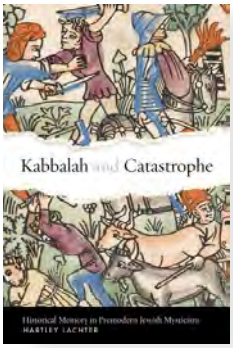

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Historical Memory in Premodern Jewish Mysticism

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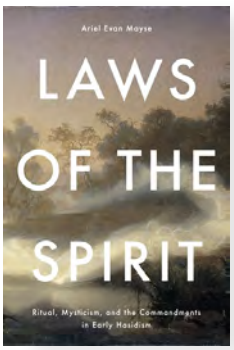

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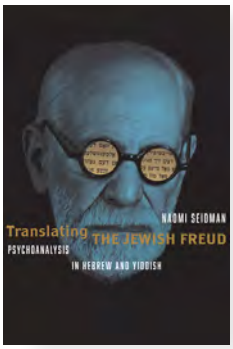

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Psychoanalysis in Hebrew and Yiddish

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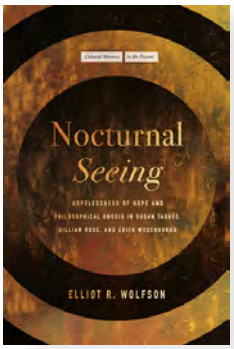

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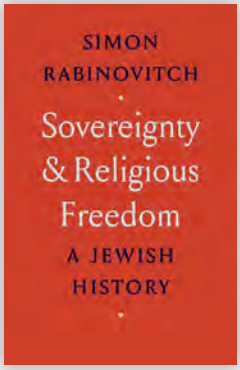

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From the Editors

Laura Limonic &
F. K. Schoeman

The theme of this issue, Jewish conversions, invites us into a conversation that is as intricate and multifaceted as the histories and cultures it touches. Conversion within Jewish contexts has long been a subject of profound inquiry, fraught with theological, cultural, and personal implications. It is a topic that, much like the act of conversion itself, is layered with meaning, emotion, and consequence. This issue seeks to unravel these layers, offering our readers a diverse array of perspectives that reflect the complexity of the subject.

From its earliest mentions in biblical texts to the lived experiences of individuals in contemporary society, Jewish conversion has never been a singular narrative. The process of conversion often intersects with a range of factors, including faith, identity, community, and even survival. For some, conversion has been a deeply personal journey of spiritual awakening and belonging. For others, it has been a response to social pressures or familial obligations, sometimes undertaken under duress. Historically, the forced conversions of Jews during periods of persecution have left a profound scar on collective memory, influencing how Jewish communities view the very idea of conversion.

Yet, conversion is not only about leaving or losing one's Jewish identity; it is also about the ways in which others choose to join the Jewish community. The essays collected here explore both the experiences of those who have converted to Judaism and those who have converted away from it. They examine how these conversions are represented in literature, film, and communal discourse. They ask complex questions about the meaning of Jewish identity, the process of making it one's own, and how this practice has been recorded, understood, and assimilated across cultural and religious contexts at different historical junctures.

Our contributors engage with these questions from various disciplinary angles, offering historical, cultural, religious, and sociological insights into the phenomenon of Jewish conversion. Some articles delve into the historical practices of conversion, exploring how different Jewish communities have understood and regulated the process over time. Others look at cultural expressions of identity among converts, examining how literature and media have portrayed the challenges and triumphs of those who choose to join the Jewish faith. Religious dimensions are also considered, with discussions of how different denominations within Judaism approach conversion, each bringing its own theological nuances to the process.

In putting together this issue, we have sought to highlight the voices of scholars, practitioners, and converts themselves, providing a platform for a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Our goal is not to provide definitive answers but to open up a dialogue that acknowledges the complexity of conversion as a choice with great personal and communal implications. The articles within this issue reflect the intricate balance between continuity and change, belonging and exclusion, faith and identity that conversion entails.

As you engage with the content of this issue, we encourage you to consider the broader implications of conversion within Jewish history and culture. How does conversion shape our understanding of Jewish identity? In what ways does it challenge or reinforce the boundaries of the Jewish community? These are the questions we hope you will ponder as you delve into the rich discussions presented in the following pages.

Laura Limonic
SUNY Old Westbury

F. K. Schoeman
University of South Carolina

From the Executive Director

Warren Hoffman

Moving On Up

In July 2024, the AJS was notified by the Center for Jewish History, its physical home for the past twenty years, that due to some changes in its space configuration we would have to vacate our office and find a new location come September. Despite the rest of the staff having gone virtual since the pandemic, I was still going into our CJH office several times a week to work. (Working from home is convenient at times; I do like have having extra time with my two free-roam rabbits, Kugel and Farfel, but I go a little stir crazy if I don't get out of the house.)

After looking at various offices around town, I found a new location for us in Times Square. (Broadway, here we come!) And it was not so long after that that I found myself sitting on the floor of my office surrounded by piles and piles of files and documents, some going back to the organization's incorporation in 1970. Drawers full of tax returns and payroll files, old check stubs and a few AMEX bills, outdated laptops and computer cords with no apparent purpose, and office supplies. Many, many office supplies. (I think we could have opened our own Staples branch!) All that wasn't particularly interesting, but more interesting were the minutes, typed and handwritten, I unearthed from previous years. Reports from former presidents, proposals for new research initiatives, development plans, and statements on a variety of issues. These documents revealed to me the AJS's rich history and how, year by year, we have worked hard to meet the changing needs of members, responded to the shifting landscape of academia, and found ways to connect the wider public with the work of our members. The changes might have seemed imperceptible at the time, but holding old issues of *Perspectives* in my hands and comparing them to this current issue revealed the organization's changes over the decades.

The theme of this issue is conversion, which often indicates changing from one thing to another, sometimes in subtle ways, but also in ways that can be more drastic or even unrecognizable. As I sorted through these files documenting the AJS's rich history, it dawned on me that the AJS itself has also gone through a conversion of sorts through the years from a small organization (the 1970 board was made up of twenty-one people—all men) with just a few hundred members to now over 1,700 members from all over the world, representing the breadth and depth of Jewish Studies.

I'm sad to leave the CJH, a building that breathes Jewish history and culture, but the truth is that the AJS is not a bunch of dusty files—it's all of you, our members, and wherever you are, we are too.

We might be moving uptown, but we're not going anywhere.

And here's our new address!

Association for Jewish Studies
1441 Broadway, 3rd Floor
Suite 3025
New York, NY 10018

Warren Hoffman
Assocation for Jewish Studies

Art & Essays

From the Art Editor

Art Editor:
Douglas Rosenberg

Excerpts from *Judiska Hjältinnor* ([Jewish Heroines], Natur & Kultur, 2024)
Illustrations by Joanna Rubin Dranger
Essays by Karin Brygger and Anneli Rådestad
Translation from Swedish by Karin Brygger

Several of the portraits will be part of a large exhibition in 2025, in Stockholm and other cities within Sweden.

Preface

Some of the women in this book are very famous. Others maybe you've never heard of. Some of them lived a very long time ago while a couple of them might be the same age as you, but have grown up on the other side of the world, in a completely different context. Someone has explored space, others have experienced injustice and fought to make the world a better place, while many have accomplished great deeds just by daring to be themselves.

The Jewish heroines we have chosen to write about have in their own way and in their own time contributed to breaking down barriers. Some of them have shaped the Jewish narrative while others have changed entire societies, or human knowledge about the world.

We want to show the great diversity in which Jewish life can take shape. Our selection of Jewish heroines shows all possible positions and lifestyles: some are secular, some have converted to Judaism, some are religious. Some of these women did not perceive themselves as particularly Jewish but were seen as Jews by the society around them. In different times and in different places a Jewish identity could mean one was met with prejudice or racism, and in some cases being Jewish has even been life threatening.

Some of the heroines wouldn't call themselves feminists, others lived during a time when feminism didn't even exist as a word, while some have been at the forefront of the feminist movement. Maybe you are a heroine? Or friend of one? Maybe you have someone in your family as your role model? Ask them to share what they believe in and what guides them.

And what do you want? Who do you want to be and what do you want to achieve in this perhaps only and precious life? Of course, there are many more important Jewish heroines than the ones we write about in this book. But we hope that the different perspectives, life choices, and strategies that this book presents will show you that many possible ways of living are open for you to try!

Stockholm 2024
Joanna Rubin Dranger
Karin Brygger
Anneli Rådestad

Jewish Heroines is inspired by the digital archive Jewish Women's Archive in which stories about Jewish women and their amazing life stories have been collected for a very long time.

AMY WINEHOUSE

Quote: I want people to hear my voice and just forget their troubles for five minutes.

1983–2011
Singer and songwriter
Great Britain

The young Amy was a mischievous little girl. Yet together with her father, who loved music, she sang Frank Sinatra songs. At school, she was curious but found it hard to sit still and concentrate. When Amy was nine years old, her parents divorced. This change had a profound effect on young Amy.

At twelve, Amy was accepted into one of London's top drama schools. She loved singing but her concentration difficulties made school difficult. She fell into a depression and developed an eating disorder. At last she dropped out of drama school, but the headmaster wouldn't let go of his former pupil and tipped off the National Youth Orchestra. The disruptive teenager with the big voice was accepted straight away.

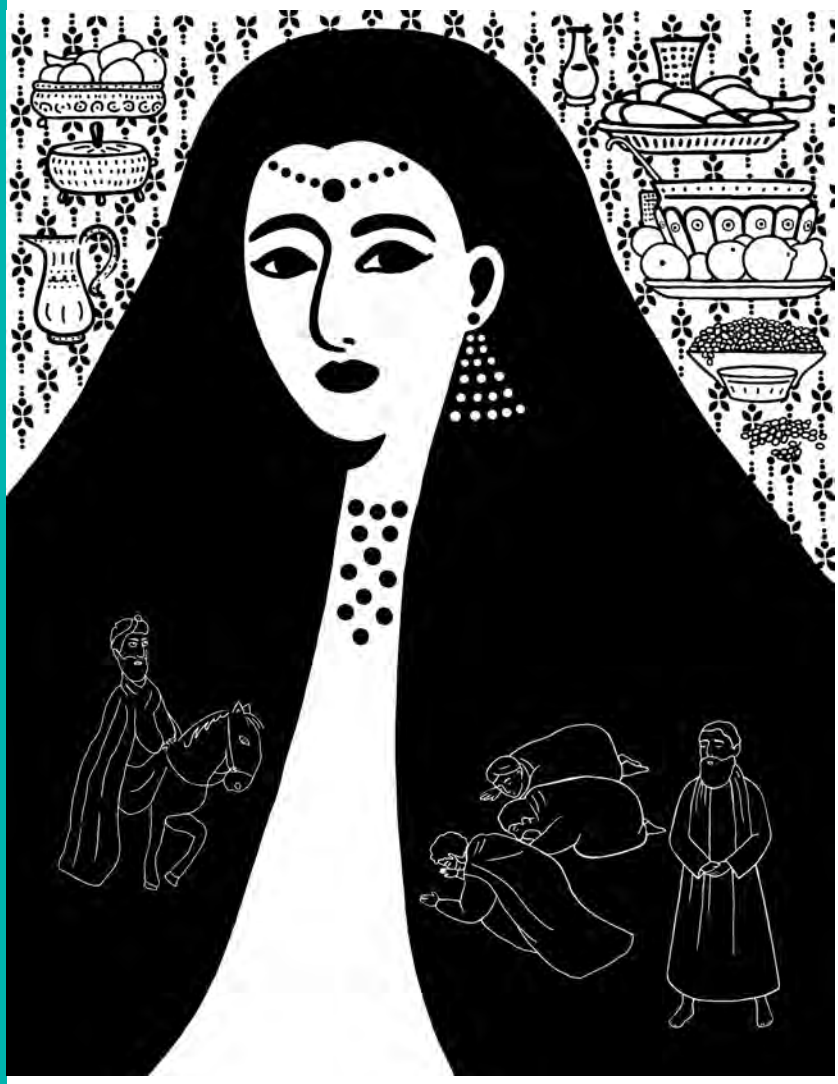
Amy was still underage when she got a record deal. In an era of hip hop and Britney Spears she was something new and unique. She wrote songs from the heart and her first album was critically acclaimed.

Amy went on tours, but it was hard to be on stage every night. Her real self was a shy girl who preferred to play pool with her friends. In a London pub she met Blake Fielder-Civil, and the two fell in love. A few years later they married and came to have a tempestuous marriage, riddled with drugs and infidelity, before finally divorcing in 2009.

The heartbreak gave birth to music. Amy transformed strong emotions and turned them into something beautiful. With her album *Back to Black*, she became a global celebrity. At the 2008 Grammy Awards, she won five Grammys, more than any other British female artist ever.

Despite her success, Amy struggled with addiction problems. At 27, she died of alcohol poisoning. In the trees outside her house, fans have carved their declarations of love. In Amy's honor, the Amy Winehouse Foundation was created to help young people with mental health and addiction problems.

– *Anneli Rådestad*



QUEEN ESTHER

Persia, 500 BCE

Leaders who willingly risk their own lives to save others tend to be more loved than others. They are the heroes we can turn to when we ourselves face difficult choices that test our courage. Queen Esther was such a woman. She wasn't just a queen—she was an intelligent Jewish leader who, thanks to her courage, managed to save the entire Jewish people of the city of Shushan where she lived.

As a child Esther was orphaned and raised by her relative Mordechai. He took care of her as if she were his own daughter. Their relationship meant a lot to Esther.

It was when King Ahasuerus of Shushan sent his first wife away that he announced a beauty contest in the country. Esther won and the king and Esther married - but she kept her Jewish name Hadassah and her Jewish identity hidden from everyone when she moved into the palace.

Mordecai eventually sought out Esther and told her that one of the king's closest men, Haman, was planning to kill the Jews in the city. Mordecai explained to her that she had to act, even though she was afraid. Saving the lives of Shushan's Jews depended upon her.

Esther had almost no opportunity to speak to the king, even though they were married. She used her charm and invited the king and Haman to a feast. During two nights of feasting, she made the king understand that Haman wanted to kill the Jews and that this meant he wanted to kill her, too. When the king realized that his wife was in danger, he set an end to Haman's life and paid tribute to Mordecai and Esther instead. The Jews of Shushan survived, and every year during Purim, Jews read the story of Esther in the Megillah.

– Karin Brygger

GLORIA GERVITZ

Quote: I bow my head to the miracle of life.

1943–2022
Poet and translator
Mexico and USA

Jewish-Mexican poet Gloria Gervitz was a descendant of Jews who fled Europe. She grew up in Mexico, and her poems reflect the Mexican culture and environment. Gloria's writing is unique, not least because she wrote on the same book of poems—*Migrations*—for more than forty years, publishing it again and again in new versions. She started in 1976 and did not stop until she died of cancer in the spring of 2022. Several versions of *Migrations* are available in Swedish. It was a way of writing the world had never seen before.

In *Migrations*, the Jewish and the Mexican take place in parallel in the story. The new country mixes with the Jewish family traditions. Gloria shows in her writing that it is possible to feel both a sense of belonging to your Jewish tradition and a sense of belonging to the country you are living in, even if it is not a Jewish country.

Gloria's poems center on the female experience in the world, on being a girl and then a woman. Many women poets have followed in Gloria's footsteps and written more openly about love and sexuality.

Gervitz wrote that the poem is a living thing, a creature almost, that changes and is changed by the each reader, by all every time it is read. In this way, she included the reader in the poem. The reader becomes 'an accomplice' in the process of the poem itself.

– Karin Brygger

EMMA GOLDMAN

Quote: When we can't dream any longer, we die.

1869–1940
Writer, feminist, and anarchist activist
Russia and Canada

Emma Goldman was born into a poor Orthodox Jewish family in the part of Russia that is now Lithuania. She was a rebellious girl and was often beaten by her father Abraham. He would have preferred her to be a boy. The family eventually moved from Russia to East Prussia and the city of Königsberg, where Emma attended secondary school. She did well at school, but because the religion teacher refused to give her a certificate of good conduct, she was not allowed to continue in secondary school. The family moved again, and Emma had to work to support herself and her family.

Life was hard and Emma now studied on her own. A book that came to mean a lot to her was Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* The book featured a girl from a strict family who chose to leave the oppressive life, just as Emma would. Together with her older sister, Emma moved to the United States at the age of 16.

There she married, but quickly divorced. She became involved in anarchism, which resisted authority. She learned to make political speeches and fell in love with the writer and anarchist Alexander Berkman, who would become her closest friend throughout her life.

Emma was known for her political speeches: "Demonstrate outside the palace of the rich and ask for work. If they don't give you work, ask for bread. If they do not give you work or bread, then take bread," she said at a meeting in 1892 after the Long Depression. Emma was sentenced to prison. In prison, she studied medicine. Emma was a pioneer of anarchism, and a woman remembered for her advocacy of equality and free love. Higher wages and shorter working hours were some of the practical proposals she put forward to improve the world.

– Karin Brygger

TIFFANY HADDISH

Quote: I consider all my successes as lessons, and all my failures are also lessons which will one day turn into successes.

1979–
Comedian and actor
USA

In 2018, Tiffany's name appeared on TIME magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world. The following year, she won a Grammy for Best Comedy Album, becoming the second African-American woman to win the award after Whoopi Goldberg. In addition, in both 2108 and 2019, she was listed as one of the 100 most powerful people in the entertainment industry by *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Tiffany's childhood was quite difficult. Her father, who had lived in Eritrea before becoming a refugee in the United States, left the family when Tiffany was three years old and when Tiffany was only nine, her mother suffered a severe car accident that caused a personality change. Tiffany became the caretaker of her four half-siblings. During this time, Tiffany's interest in comedy and humor was awakened. She discovered that by being funny, she could change her mother's mood from being mean to happy. If she did this, she would not be abused. At school, she also used humor to make others laugh, and to protect herself from bullys.

At 17, Tiffany was quite rowdy, but she was also lucky. She got the chance to develop her comedic talent at Laugh Factory Comedy Camp. There, Tiffany met people who believed in her, and she discovered that she could make comedy out of the painful experiences she had.

As an adult, Tiffany applied for and was granted citizenship in Eritrea. She has been criticized for this because Eritrea is a dictatorship. As an adult, she has also sought her Jewish roots and had her Bat Mitzvah when she turned 40.

– Karin Brygger

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

Quote: I don't think I could give advice to my younger self because she probably wouldn't listen.

1949–
Photographer
USA

Five hours before John Lennon of the Beatles was murdered, a photograph was taken of him and his wife, the artist Yoko Ono. The photograph became famous all over the world, for its composition but also because it was the last portrait of Lennon. The photo was taken by Annie Leibovitz. When Annie is asked what her most important image is, she claims that it is the image of Lennon that she will be remembered for. But the truth is that it is just one of many famous portraits Annie has taken.

Annie was born in the USA in 1949 as the third child in a group of six siblings. She is a third-generation American, with roots in Estonia and Romania. Her father worked in the army, and the family moved a lot. Her mother had a quite different occupation; she was a dance teacher and artist. Both parents' professions shaped young Annie, who took her first photographs when the family lived in the Philippines during the Vietnam War. But while the trip to the Philippines was important, it was her mother's love of dance and art that inspired Annie to become a photographer.

It was lucky that Annie followed her dream and did not become a teacher of art and visual arts as she first thought. Today, she has been named a Living Legend by the US Library of Congress and she was the first woman to participate in an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington.

Annie's great love was the author and critic Susan Sontag, whom she met when she was asked to take Susan's portrait. They became and stayed lovers until Susan died of cancer in 2004. "Together we got through life," Annie states.

Annie's identity is deeply marked by being Jewish, even though she claims she doesn't live a particularly Jewish life.

– Karin Brygger

BARBRA STREISAND

Quote: There is nothing more important in life than love.

1942–
Actor, singer, film director, and film producer
USA

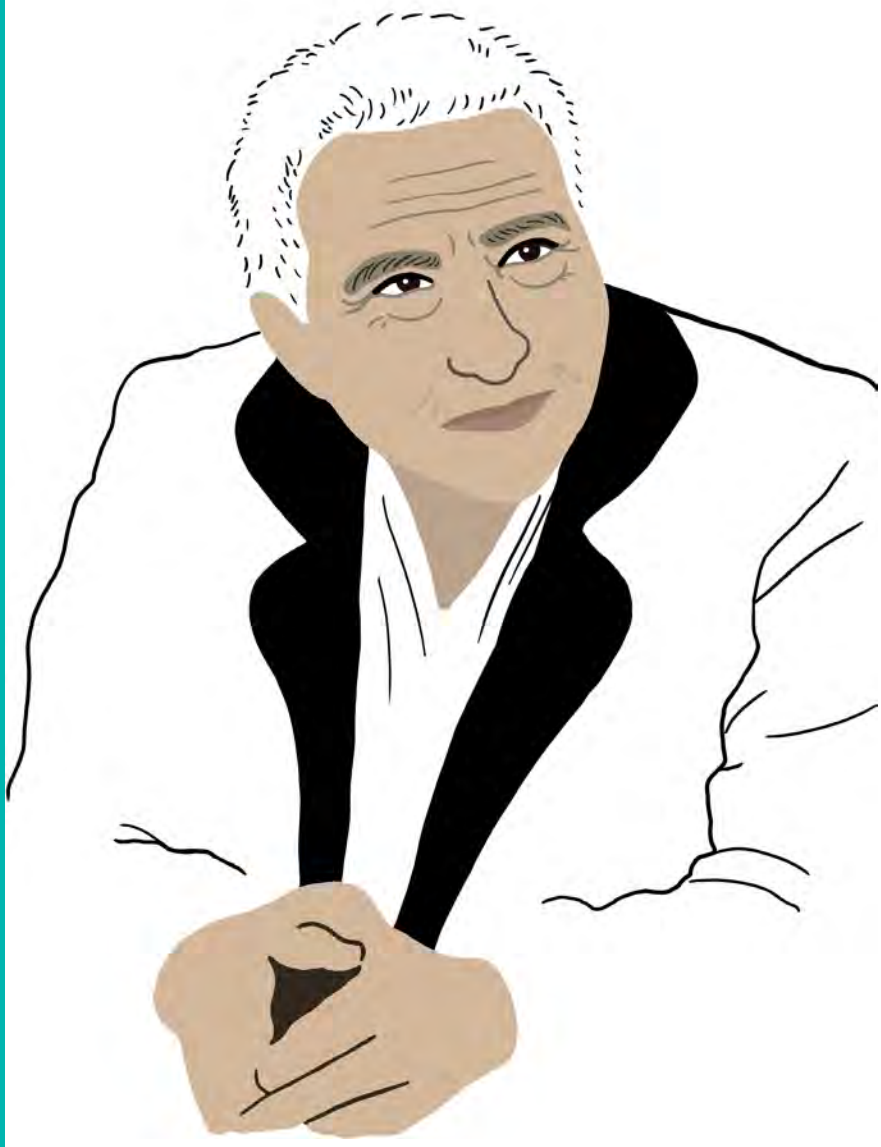
Singer and actress Barbra Streisand has released over sixty records and sold over 140 million albums. She has produced and directed films. She is successful, admired, and prolific, but she is also known as a woman who dares to take the space she deserves. She stands up for her opinions, including political ones. Her generosity—choosing to donate money to various charities—has also made her known as a philanthropist.

Barbra Streisand knew early as a child what she wanted to become. She was born into a Jewish family in Brooklyn, New York. Shortly after her first birthday, she lost her father. She grew up with her mother, her brother Sheldon, and, eventually, a stepfather and half-sister. In order to have the opportunity to sing and dance, Barbra started taking acting lessons in high school. When she got a little older, she moved to Manhattan to perform in various nightclubs. Even then, she had a very special voice and was a mix of both funny and sincere.

Barbra Streisand's acting career began in the theater. She made her film debut in 1968 with *Funny Girl*, and won her first Oscar. In the 1970s, she felt she had more talent than just being on stage. She started her own film company!

The first movie she produced starred herself in the lead role. It was the movie *Yentl*, based on a short story by Jewish Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer. With *Yentl*, Barbra did something groundbreaking—she entered the world of cinema in a way that women had not done before. The film made her the first woman to direct, produce, write, and act in the same movie. The film also won a Golden Globe Award for Best Director.

– Karin Brygger



GERTRUDE STEIN

Quote: Suppose no one asked a question. What would the answer be?

1874–1946
Writer
USA and France

What is it to be groundbreaking? Radical? An artist?

Above all, it means going against the grain, breaking with the norms, creating and changing. Throughout history, there have been women who have been radical, who have ignored what people think, and especially what powerful men think or decide. One such woman was the writer Gertrude Stein, who was born in the United States but lived much of her life in Paris. And it was in Paris that Gertrude became a famous writer and where she held her famous literary salons.

A literary salon is a gathering, or small party, where artists meet to discuss and show their work to each other. Gertrude was visited by Pablo Picasso, Matisse, and Ernest Hemingway, among others.

What distinguished Gertrude was her ability to innovate language and write in a completely new way, but also her refusal to make herself less than she was. Gertrude called herself a 'genius', she knew she was special and had something to offer the world.

Gertrude lived with a woman called Alice B. Toklas, and they were open about their love for each other. Two women living together was unusual at the time, so you could say that Gertrude and Alice were the forerunners of the movement calling for non-discrimination against the LGBT+ community. Their effort was simply to live as they wanted and not be afraid. Today, they are considered one of the world's most famous artist couples. They were inseparable until Getrude's death.

– Karin Brygger

SUSAN SONTAG

Quote: Real art has the capacity to make us nervous.

1933–2004
Writer, literary critic, feminist
USA

Author Susan Sontag was born in the United States but spent her early years in China, where her father was a fur trader. After his death, when Susan was 5 years old, she, her mother, and sister returned to the USA. Her mother remarried, and Susan took her stepfather's surname—Sontag.

Susan grew up in the USA where she remained until her death. But in her youth, she spent a couple of years in Paris, and that time shaped her the most. It was in Paris she began to socialize with writers and artists and understood where she belonged in the world.

Susan considered herself a fiction writer, yet it wasn't her novels that made her name in the public eye, but her essays and intellectual reflections on art. Among other things, she wrote a book called *On Photography*.

She also wrote about themes that other writers were hesitant about: about suffering and illness, pornography, and the war in Vietnam. She had personal experience of illness—she was diagnosed with cancer quite early but recovered. This deepened her outlook on life. Although she chose to leave her own fate largely out of her writing, it made her approach illness in a new way. In her diary, she wrote that it is from language that she got the most energy.

With her last great love, photographer Annie Leibowitz, Susan had a daughter. She also had a son from a previous marriage.

Susan Sontag came to mean a great deal to lovers of art and literature who were searching for a language that could capture what it is to be human.

– Karin Brygger

AAJR

AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

Graduate Student Seminar 2025
to be held at New York University

Hosted by New York University's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies

May 18-20, 2025

Faculty
Lila Corwin Berman, Paul & Sylvia Steinberg Professor of American Jewish History, New York University

Josef Stern, William H. Colvin Professor of Philosophy (Emeritus), University of Chicago

The AAJR is pleased to sponsor a residential seminar for doctoral students in all areas of Jewish studies. The seminar will be held from Sunday, May 18 to Tuesday, May 20, 2025, at New York University. The seminar aims to create a community in which graduate students can consider methods and trends in the field, discuss their research, and learn about the academic profession in general and Jewish studies in particular. To facilitate conversation and community, the group will discuss a few preassigned articles and take a field trip or two. The core of the seminar will be a research workshop, in which participants pre-circulate and present part of their dissertation (a section of a chapter, conference paper, prospectus, etc.) for feedback.

This seminar serves students who are studying in North America. Students from outside New York City will be provided on-campus housing and travel stipends. AAJR will cover meals for all participants.

Enrollment in the seminar is competitive and limited to those who have completed all program requirements up to and including preliminary exams, and who are either formulating their dissertation prospectus or writing the dissertation.

Applicants must submit, in one PDF with all materials combined:

- A three- to five-page description of their doctoral studies' focus and dissertation topic
- Name and email of advisor
- An (official or unofficial) transcript or list of courses taken in graduate school
- A curriculum vitae (noting foreign language proficiency)

Deadline is January 30, 2025. Please email all materials to Lila Corwin Berman (lila.corwin.berman@nyu.edu) and Josef Stern (j-stern@uchicago.edu) with "AAJR Seminar" in the subject line. Applicants will be notified in early March.

AAJR

AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

Baron Book Prize

The American Academy for Jewish Research invites submissions for the Salo Wittmayer Baron Book Prize. The Baron Book Prize ($3,000) is awarded annually to the author of an outstanding first book in Jewish studies.

Eligibility: An academic book in English, in any area of Jewish studies published in calendar year 2024. The work must be the author's first scholarly book. Authors must have received their Ph.D. within the previous ten years, no earlier than 2014.

Deadline: Submissions must be received by January 31, 2025. The winner will be notified in late spring 2025.

When submitting a book for consideration, please have four copies sent, along with a statement including the author's email address and when and where the author received their Ph.D. In addition, please send a digital submission of the author's book to the below email address. Hard copy books can be sent to:

Cheri Thompson
American Academy for Jewish Research
221 E. Michigan Ave #883
Grass Lake, Michigan 49240
Please email admin.office@aajr.org when books are placed in the mail.

For further information, please contact Professor Marsha Rozenblit, Chair of the prize committee at mrozenbl@umd.edu.

AAJR

AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

Dissertation Research Funding Opportunities

AAJR provides stipends for up to $4,000 for dissertation research grants. The funds are not intended for language study or equipment. Funding is available to Ph.D. graduate students and those up to four years following their graduation, in any field of Jewish studies at a North American university. Applicants must have submitted their Ph.D. Dissertation prospectus and have a demonstrated need for materials from archival, library, or manuscript collections or for ethnographic research. Applications for research-related expenses and/or the purchase of copied or scanned items will be considered. The application should consist of:

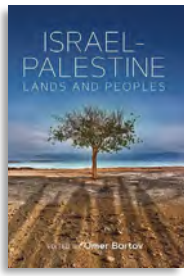
1. A *curriculum vitae*, a proposal of no more than five pages double spaced that describes the intended research (e.g., travel, collections to be consulted, sites to be visited) and an itemized budget, approved by the applicant's advisor, indicating other available or requested sources of summer support. Applicants should notify us if they receive other summer grants. *Submit one PDF with all materials combined*.

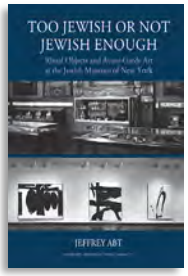
2. A letter of recommendation from the applicant's principal advisor. The advisor should indicate whether the applicant's university provides support for summer research and on what terms, and the advisor must sign off on the submitted budget.

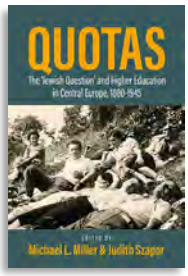
All materials should be submitted via email to Cheri Thompson at admin.office@aajr.org by February 3, 2025.

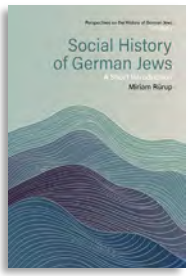
For questions and further information, please contact Professor Shachar Pinsker, Chair of the review committee, at spinsker@umich.edu. Awards will be announced in late spring 2025.

Essential reading in jewish studies from berghahn









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"I Don't Care What I Am Called": Mary Antin and the Boundaries of Religious Identity

Rachel B. Gross

In 1923, the Jewish writer Mary Antin arrived as a "guest"—a patient—at Gould Farm, a liberal Protestant therapeutic community in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, to address her mental health challenges. A decade earlier, Antin had become a celebrity with the 1912 publication of her best-selling autobiography, *The Promised Land*. In that book, the first American autobiography by a turn-of-the-century eastern European Jewish immigrant, Antin asserted that Russian Jews should be embraced as new American citizens. In an era of fierce political battles over open immigration, the book was an instant national best seller. Antin crisscrossed the country as a sought-after speaker in both political and religious venues. She lunched with Theodore Roosevelt, and she was a headliner on Charles Evans Hughes's unsuccessful campaign for president in 1916. In this period, Mary Antin was spectacularly famous—and then her marriage collapsed, she had what she called a "nervous breakdown,"[i] and the Jewish celebrity found Christ.

At the height of her celebrity, Antin symbolized Judaism to many Americans.

Many other scholars have addressed the conversion narrative at the heart of *The Promised Land*. "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over," Antin began her story of becoming an American. But while *The Promised Land* made Antin famous, it was not the end of her journey. Its account of Antin's complete change from Russian Jew to American citizen was a political response to nativist anti-immigration efforts. But stories of "conversion" can mask the complexities of lived experience. In her own life, Antin often embraced many identities at once. Especially in her later years, Antin pursued what I am calling "spiritual adventures," vigorously exploring non-Jewish religious ideas without relinquishing her Jewish identity.

At the height of her celebrity, Antin symbolized Judaism to many Americans. One enthusiastic Christian audience member described her as "this Jew of the Jews."[ii] Antin got tired of being the frozen caricature that others—Jews and non-Jews—wanted of her and that celebrity seemed to demand of her. She was interested in seeking out meaning throughout her life, on her own terms, in ways that defied others' conventional religious boundaries.

More or less intentionally, as her marriage and her mental health shattered in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Antin quit being a celebrity. After being treated by "an assortment of neurologists" and experiencing "the hells of the sanitariums," she arrived at Gould Farm. "At the end of 1923," she wrote to a friend, "I abandoned the doctors and entered on the life of prayer."[iii] It was not a life of Jewish prayer.

Antin had long been interested in Christianity; Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale had performed her wedding to a non-Jewish man. At Gould Farm, Antin joined Protestants who viewed social service for people with mental illnesses as a way to bring the kingdom of God. Her spiritual adventures continued in the 1930s, when she briefly became a devotee of the Indian mystic Meher Baba, whose followers see him as an avatar, or incarnation of God. In the 1940s, the last decade of her life, Antin turned toward Rudolph Steiner's concept of anthroposophy, which posits that a spiritual world is accessible to human experience.

Photograph of Mary Antin with children, 1916. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/2016650579/.

Antin's religious passions can seem capricious. Her relationship with Christ varied throughout her life. She eagerly embraced what she saw as "Christian values" and even spoke in "the name of Christ" at times, especially when serving as a booster for Gould Farm.[iv] In 1928, exhilarated by the teachings of Christian healer Dr. Thomas Parker Boyd, Antin exclaimed, "I possess Christ now, where previously I merely knew him."[v] This sounds a lot like a conversion. But Antin's passion for Boyd and this approach to Jesus were short-lived, and viewing her momentary enthusiasm as a conversion can obscure our understanding of her experience. It was Antin's religious seeking—for spiritual fulfillment and communities of like-minded people—that were constant throughout her life.

Antin's most consistent and longest-lasting religious community was Gould Farm. She became an occasional staff member and an integral part of the Gould Farm "family." Most of the vast correspondence to her Gould Farm friends emphasizes the Christian beliefs they share. But her Jewishness reappears unexpectedly. Although Gould Farm welcomed Jewish and Catholic guests from its beginnings, it was a decidedly Protestant organization. A parenthetical in a letter to Farm founder Agnes Gould about Jewish financial support of the Farm suggests Antin was self-conscious about her Jewishness: "I hope there is nothing scandalous in the way I turn Jew on occasion. Seriously, as a Jewish member of the staff I have felt sensitive about this matter."[vi]

Her Jewishness could appear in a moment of elation. Recuperating in a hospital, Antin was glad to hear from friends. Writing to Gould, she rhapsodized, "Do you ever give thanks for the postal system? I do. Blessed be the Lord our God, King of the universe, who prompted man

Still, even as Antin was spiritually adventurous, she continued to see herself—and others continued to see her—as a Jew.

to devise ways for long-distance communication."[vii] Gould, raised Episcopalian and moving in ecumenical Christian circles, would have been unlikely to recognize it, but Antin adapted the classic Jewish blessing formulation, one of the first religious constructions she would have learned as a Jewish child in Russia. In at least one moment of joy, Antin instinctively turned back to Jewish patterns.

But Antin refused to be pigeonholed. Mindful of the ways that Jewishness divided her from Gould, she drew a literal line under her innovative blessing before recalling how she learned at Gould Farm that of all the "wise sayings of the sages . . . the words of Jesus of Nazareth [were] of the greatest worth."[viii] Just after asserting her Jewishness, Antin turned back to the beliefs and experiences that she and Gould shared in common, underscoring her own central place in the Gould Farm family.

Still, even as Antin was spiritually adventurous, she continued to see herself–and others continued to see her–as a Jew. At one point, she told a friend that she was "not a Christian … in any popular sense," but that she embraced a description of her as "a Christian and a Jew." "I don't care what I am called, but I want to be sure I don't mislead anyone," she explained.[ix] Like many other twentieth-century American Jews, Antin explored non-Jewish spiritual ideas and communities without relinquishing her Jewish identity. Antin's idiosyncratic and sometimes inconsistent approach to religious boundary-crossing complicates our understanding of "conversion" and what it can mean to explore other religious approaches while maintaining an identity as a Jew–and famous Jew, at that.

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i Mary Antin, entry in *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1942), 33–35.

ii Mrs. Stanley Ross Fisher, "Mary Antin at Wellesley," *The Congregationalist* 102, no. 22, June 1, 1922, 687.

iii Mary Antin to Mary Austin, March 11, 1925, mssAU 1-5456, Mary Hunter Austin Papers, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

iv Mary Antin to Grace Babson, May 15, 1935, 2008-0127, Mary Antin Papers, Gould Farm.

v Mary Antin to Agnes Gould, June 3, 1928, 2008-1032, Mary Antin Papers, Gould Farm.

vi Antin to Gould, January 27, 1935, 2008-0125, Mary Antin Papers, Gould Farm.

vii Antin to Gould, February 19, 1930, 2008-0130, Mary Antin Papers, Gould Farm.

viii Antin to Gould, February 19, 1930.

ix Antin to Austin.

"Convert, *verb*: To turn in mind, feeling, or conduct"

The Oxford English Dictionary

Ruth Panofsky

It was a crisp winter night in Montreal in the mid-1970s. Samuel was still single, though he'd been involved with several women, all Jewish. Joan was new to the city, outside the circle of friends gathered in an overheated apartment on the slope of Côte-des-Neiges Road. Soon, they were off in a corner, chatting. They had lots to talk about.

Joan shared Samuel's passion for reading, travelling, and hiking. She was clever. She was kind. She even warmed to Sally, his prized Weimaraner.

Samuel was not at all observant. He was a Zionist, but his ardor for Israel did not impede his feelings for Joan.

They were dating, both past thirty and thinking of the future, when Samuel made it clear that marriage was contingent upon Joan's conversion. He was less clear about why he wanted her to convert.

Samuel's mother had died when he was seventeen. He continued to reside at home well into his twenties, and his widowed father—my paternal grandfather—had come to rely on him for practical and emotional support. Samuel was an excellent cook; he was good company. He was also devoted and dutiful, so when his father insisted that he marry a Jewish woman, Samuel meant to accede to the demand. Intermarriage was anathema to my grandfather, as it was for many Jews of his generation, the first to be born in North America.

Samuel's affection for Joan soon gave rise to guilt. He felt he was betraying his father. He dreaded the judgment of his only sibling, a brother who was ten years his senior. He did not want to alienate his family; he did not want to give up Joan.

Instead, Joan gave up church attendance, Christmas, and Easter. She loosened the tie to the religion and culture that had shaped her. It wasn't an easy relinquishment, but she loved Samuel. She adored his blue eyes, ruddy beard, and gentle ways; she hoped they might form a family.

Joan studied under a Conservative rabbi and in 1978, following her conversion ceremony, she and Samuel married. Joan's parents stood under the huppah. They accepted their daughter's shift, knowing it was difficult, yet delighted in her happiness and welcomed their new son-in-law into the fold.

Samuel's father, while appeased, was far less open. Four years later, when Joan and Samuel's first child arrived, he could not forget that the boy had been born to a convert. The infant was circumcised and given a Hebrew name; he was brought up in the Jewish faith; and when he turned thirteen, he had a bar mitzvah. Even so, in the mind and heart of my grandfather, the son could not redeem his mother's origins.

I was in my early twenties at that point. My loyalty lay with my aunt, and I felt the sting of my grandfather's distaste. For her part, Joan remained respectful and hopeful. She wanted approval. He was, after all, her father-in-law.

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By the time she met Joan, Barbara—my Jewish mother—had been in the family for more than a decade. In 1957, she had married Samuel's brother, Martin. Two years later, they purchased a bungalow in Chomedey, a new suburban development eighteen miles north of the city, where they were raising three girls.

Barbara could not please her father-in-law either. Ever traditional in view, he longed for male progeny and kept pining for a boy. Each Friday night, when he would visit our home for Shabbat dinner, he expressed that hope. After Kiddush, he would insert his own weekly prayer for a grandson. On one memorable evening, Barbara—who was nearing fifty and finally had had it—blurted out, "You do know how old I am, don't you?" I was fourteen then, an eldest daughter keenly attuned to sarcasm. That night, I also heard torment and daring in my mother's voice.

At first, Barbara was resistant to Joan, who was fifteen years younger and from a different milieu. Joan had
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She taught Joan how to prepare for the high holidays and how to bake challah. ... Steadily, they overcame cultural differences and bonded as sisters-in-law.

been reared in relative comfort on a genteel drive in the quiet capital city of Ottawa. Barbara had lived in inferior walk-ups on the gritty streets of Jewish Montreal. She, too, held customary views about marrying out of the faith. She might have envied Joan her son—the boy she never had and may have wished for.

Nevertheless, Joan was easy to be around. She was considerate, as well as patient. She noticed Barbara's hesitancy and awaited her favor.

Slowly, as she came to appreciate Joan's determination to learn and her desire to fit in, Barbara softened. She was moved when Joan sought guidance on how to be a Jewish wife and flattered when Joan asked for her recipes. She taught Joan how to prepare for the high holidays and how to bake challah. Every Passover, she shared her table with Joan. Steadily, they overcame cultural differences and bonded as sisters-in-law.

After Martin's death in 1997 and throughout Samuel's prolonged suffering with dementia—he finally succumbed to the condition in 2016—their connection grew stronger. They chatted over the phone routinely; visited one another regularly; and went out for dinner repeatedly. They shared laughter, memories, a sense of kinship.

Barbara aged and, in due course, gave up driving. Joan chauffeured her between their homes, provided home-cooked meals and companionship. When Barbara sold her condominium and moved into an assisted living facility, Joan checked in weekly. If Barbara needed support, Joan accompanied her to medical appointments.

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My grandfather never fully accepted Joan as a convert, just as he never fully absolved Barbara for having had girls instead of boys. Each woman always knew she was found wanting, and for reasons that were outside her control.

Now, looking back with some sadness and relief, I suspect my grandfather's rigidity may have been a unifying cause for Joan and Barbara, who gradually converged as aides and allies. Their conversion came after his demise—rather late in their lives—but together they detached from his dominion and at last discerned their individual worth, as Jews and as women.

RUTH PANOFSKY *is professor of English at Toronto Metropolitan University. Most recently, she is the editor of* The New Spice Box: Contemporary Jewish Writing *(2020) and* Bring them Forth *(2022), a volume of poetry.*
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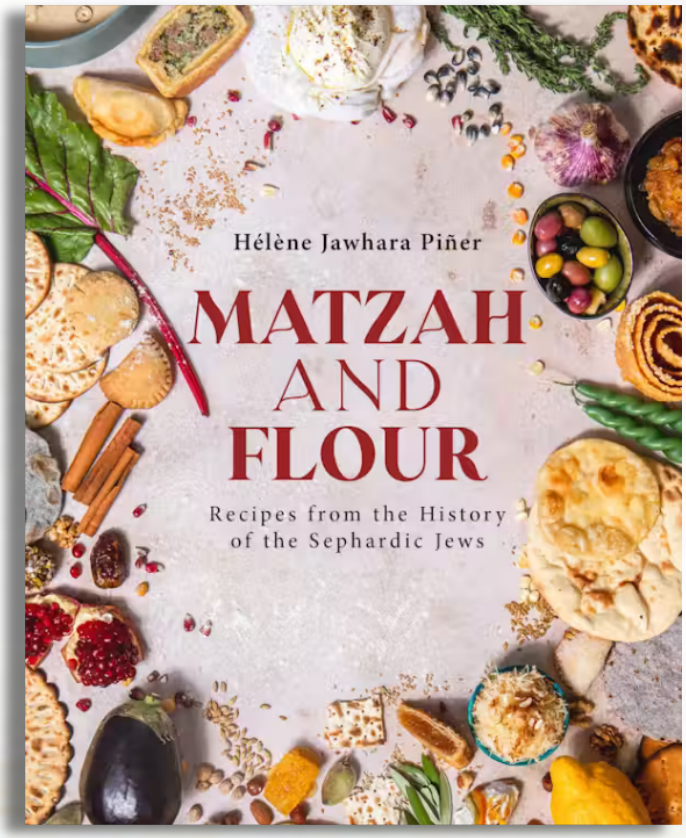

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Conversion by Combat

Anne Perez

Is it possible to fight one's way into the Jewish people? In my research on early Zionist attitudes and policies toward conversion, I encountered many examples of individuals and families who integrated into the Yishuv or the early State of Israel as "non-Jewish Jews," what Asher Cohen and Bernard Susser have called those who undergo "sociological" rather than religious conversion into Jewish society. "Non-Jewish Jews" at times served as object lessons in their communities, either by illustrating the legal and bureaucratic challenges in a state with both civil and religious jurisdictions, or the potential and achievement of democracy and pluralism in Israel. These "sociological converts" could also reinforce the identity of Israel as a "Non-Arab State" (to borrow the words of Ian Lustick). Examples of "sociological conversion," specifically by means of military service, are found as early as the Mandate period, but more recent—and tragic—examples have arisen during Israel's war with Gaza in the wake of Hamas's October 7 massacres.

Sharp debates over personal status law during early statehood illustrated a range of opinions surrounding the standards for membership in the Jewish people, which at times included military service. In 1957, debates surrounding the burial of an Israeli child with a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father underscored the family's equality to other citizens. One article even stated that "we receive them as converts from a national perspective, equivalent to us," precisely because, among other things, their children serve in the army.[i] Another early case indicated similar attitudes: Non-Jewish German Otto Hozmeier immigrated to Palestine with his German Jewish wife in 1933. According to his son Micky Oz, Hozmeier was never pressured to convert to Judaism. Despite the fact that he was not a Jew, he acquired an important role in managing the storage, concealment, and distribution of illegal arms for the Haganah in the 1930s and 40s. When Hozmeier died in 1961, Oz was informed that his father could not be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Hozmeier's friend from their Haganah days reportedly consulted a rabbi about the burial, insisting that the deceased was a *lamed vavnik*—one of the thirty-six hidden righteous people who, according to talmudic sources, perpetually justify humanity before God. The rabbi concluded that *lamed vavniks* need not convert to Judaism and therefore he approved of Hozmeier's burial in a Jewish ceremony at Sade Warburg. Oz's story bears traces of urban legend; would a rabbi simply take this man's word for it that Hozmeier had been a *lamed vavnik*—especially since according to tradition they are thought to be Jews anyway? Regardless, Hozmeier had been incorporated into the Haganah and his colleague insisted his excellent service justified his Jewish burial.[ii]

The possibility of sociological conversion obviously undermines the rabbinical jurisdiction over conversion in Israel, but from the beginning, the famously statist first prime minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion questioned the necessity for rabbinic authority over Jewish membership and elevated the foundational role of military service. Scholar Netanel Fisher argues that Ben-Gurion utilized a "biblical" rather than "rabbinic" approach to Jewish conversion, citing Ben-Gurion's insistence that "I do not use the word conversion [*giyur*]. I will use the biblical word—Judaization [*hityahadut*]… The Bible only speaks of Judaizers [*mityahadim*]. Did they go to the mikveh? No. They Judaized."[iii] Ben-Gurion further argued that "If we were to insist that [Moses's Egyptian wife] Zipporah should have converted in front of three rabbis, where in the world would they have found three rabbis in those days?"[iv] I would argue that Ben-Gurion's allusions to biblical cases are not as indicative of his concern with biblical precedents as they are polemics against the authority of rabbinical courts. Along with his questioning of rabbinical monopoly over Jewish conversion, Ben-Gurion emphasized the importance of the military, rather than religious observance, for sustaining the

As Christian Filipinos, they were granted citizenship in the Jewish state by virtue of their son's fall in war.

Jewish state. In a famous 1952 exchange between Ben-Gurion and Rabbi Avraham Karelitz, the two disagreed over whether Torah students or IDF soldiers shouldered the heavier burden for Israel—Ben-Gurion, of course, considered it the latter. While Ben-Gurion did not explicitly link his view of Judaization with military service, between his views against the necessity for rabbinic conversion and for the centrality of military service we can surmise he would consider it one of the main avenues by which social "Judaization" would take place in a Israel—a process that took on demographically significant proportions since the arrival of hundreds of thousands of halakhically non-Jewish immigrants to Israel since 1991 from the Former Soviet Union, most of whom served in the IDF.

A more recent and tragic example of sociological conversion via combat has taken place during Israel's war with Gaza after October 7. Cedrick Garin/Green was born in Israel to Filipino foreign workers (a population whose presence in Israel has been growing since the early 1990s). When Garin was just a toddler, his father was arrested and deported for having an expired visa, and Garin's mother raised him in Israel as a single parent. After problems with criminal activity in his youth, Garin joined the Israeli military, finishing his service in 2021 with a certificate of distinction—and newly attained Israeli citizenship. Garin then worked as a security guard for Naftali Bennett during his premiership. Garin was conscripted from reserves for Operation Swords of Iron in Gaza, and in January 2024 he died when a building collapsed on him and twenty other soldiers. Garin's family mourned him with various religious practices: a funeral led by Christian ministers as well as members of the IDF rabbinate, a shiva at his (Christian) home, and a burial in an Israeli military cemetery.

Garin's legacy further suggests sociological conversion via combat. He received citizenship as a soldier who finished service with distinction. His shiva was visited by Israeli officials, including former prime minister Bennett. Bennett even called Garin a hero of Israel and a great soul—not quite a *lamed vavnik*, but valorized nonetheless.[v] Blogger Douglas Alden writes that Garin's shiva was promoted on social media in the same way as other shiva announcements for soldiers who did not have large Jewish families, in order to ensure attendance (even if from complete strangers).[vi] Significantly, Garin's death also paved the way for his parents' Israeli citizenship: while Garin's father had been arrested and deported for failing to file the paperwork to extend his visa, Interior Minister Moshe Arbel informed Garin's parents during his bereavement visit that the Population and Immigration Authority would be processing their Israeli citizenship.[vii] As Christian Filipinos, they were granted citizenship in the Jewish state by virtue of their son's fall in war.

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vi Douglas Alden, "A Filipino Shiva Call in Tel Aviv," Life during Wartime (Substack), February 1, 2024, https://lifeduringwartime.substack.com/p/a-filipino-shiva-call-in-tel-aviv.

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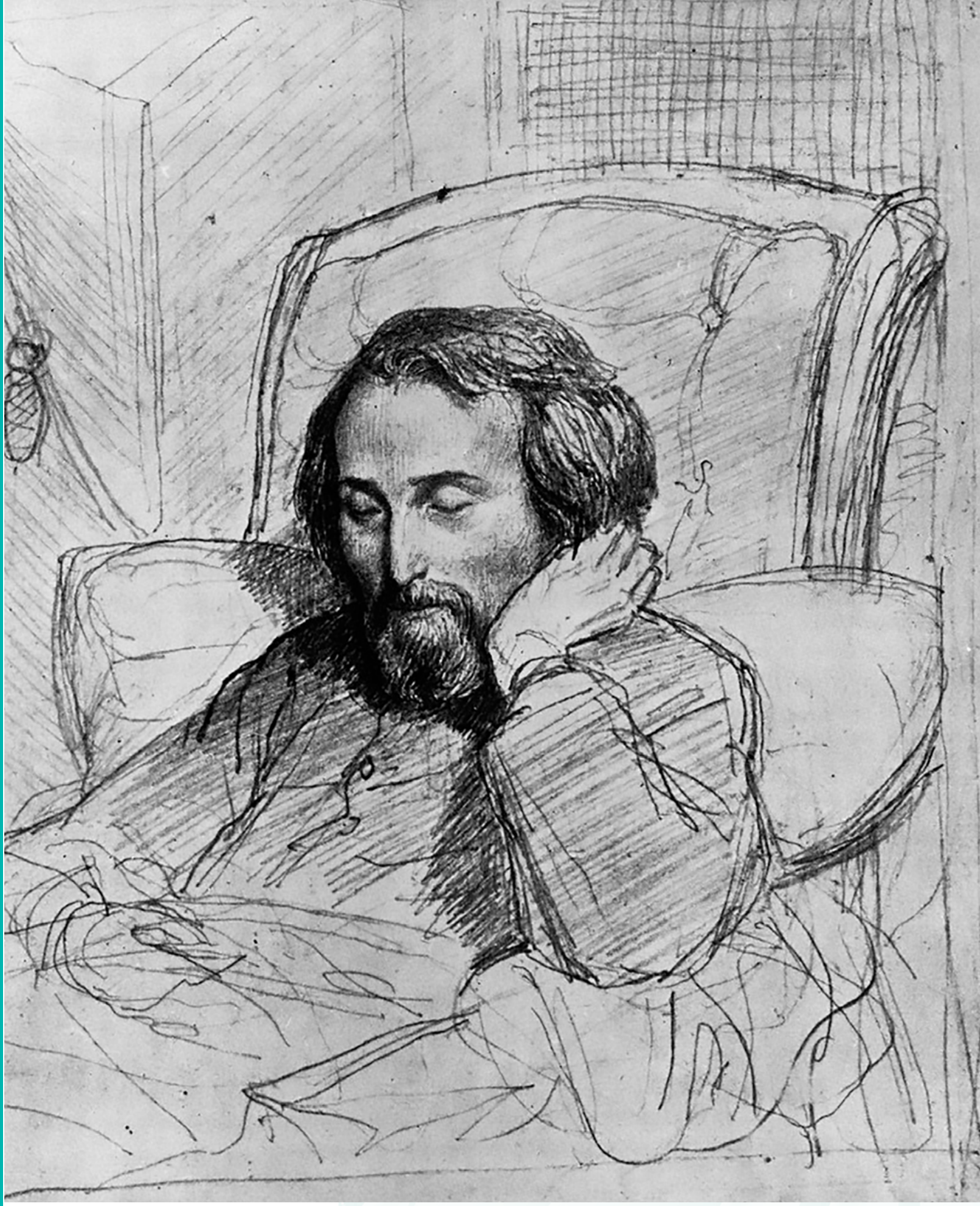

Charles Gleyre. Portrait of Heinreich Heine*, c. 1856. Drawing on paper. Via Wikimedia Commons.*

Heine, Converts, the Wandering Jew

Lisa Lampert-Weissig

According to legend, as Jesus made his way to be crucified, a Jewish man insulted him and in response, Jesus cursed the man to immortality. The encounter led the man to convert to Christianity. Known as the Wandering Jew, he is said to roam the earth, speaking of his Christian faith and his repentance to all who will listen. That this wanderer is still called "Jew" lays bare the anti-Jewish prejudice animating the legend. In important early accounts, such as that in Matthew Paris's thirteenth-century *Chronica majora*, the Wandering Jew legend serves as a means to recount the Christian narrative of the Passion, thereby supplanting any interest in allowing the Wandering Jew to share his personal memories beyond this event. The curse outweighs the conversion. Poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), also a Jewish convert to Christianity, seems to have seen his own difficult conversion experience reflected in this legend. His brief but brilliant treatments transform it into a vehicle for a distinctly Jewish perspective. Heine's Wandering Jew also provides insights into his views on conversion and on Jewish-Christian relations more generally.

In 1825, Heine chose baptism in the (ultimately fruitless) hope of obtaining a university position, something barred to Jews by German law. He immediately regretted this choice. In an 1826 letter to his close friend, Jewish intellectual Moses Moser, Heine shares his agonizing realization that even baptism cannot "wash away" his Jewishness in his fellow Germans' eyes. He illustrates this point with a vivid vignette: nestled by the hearth, a mother retells the Wandering Jew legend to her children. As the frightened children listen intently, the blast of a passing post horn breaks through the forest calm. Aboard the post coach sit Jewish merchants on their way to the famous Leipzig Fair.

Despite their high degrees of assimilation, including Heine's conversion, Heine sees both himself and Moser as unwitting Jewish protagonists in Christian-told tales.

The scene connects the eerie eternal Jew with ordinary Jewish tradesmen like Heine's own father. Heine calls these men *Schacherjuden*, which can simply mean "Jewish tradesmen," but which Amos Elon translates as "Jewish crooks."[i] This word choice subtly indicates how Christian antisemitism melds together centuries-old Christian prejudice against Jewish commerce with alienating myth like the Wandering Jew story. Such tales, passed down between generations, perpetuate Jewish exclusion. Of himself and Moser, Heine writes, "We, we are the heroes of the tales, but we don't know it ourselves. No barber can shave away the white beard, whose edge has been blackened again by time."[ii] Despite their high degrees of assimilation, including Heine's conversion, Heine sees both himself and Moser as unwitting Jewish protagonists in Christian-told tales.

This is Heine's first imagining of the Wandering Jew's black-tipped beard, a physical feature that provides a sharp contrast to the Cain-like mark described in roughly contemporary works such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) or Eugène Sue's 1844 *Le Juif errant* (The Wandering Jew). This distinctive beard symbolizes not only immortality, but the "indelible" nature of diasporic Jewish identity. It serves as both a positive sign of Jewish observance and a distinguishing sign used by Christians to further isolation and discrimination.

We can spot the Wandering Jew by his beard in his brief later appearances over Heine's career. He figures nowhere more powerfully than in "Jehuda ben Halevy," published in Heine's final poetry collection, *Romanzero*, in 1851:

In Heine's verse, the legend's Christian triumphalism becomes a mere ripple within a large, rich, resilient, and never-surrendered heritage.

Where the soil still glowed with radiance
From the footsteps of the prophets,
Where the air was still imbued with
The eternal breath of God—

"What a lamentable sight!" once
Cried a pilgrim, whose long beard
Flowed down silver-white, though strangely
At its tip the hair was growing
Black again, and almost seemed to
Undergo rejuvenation—[iii]

This Wandering Jew is not a convert. He is a Jewish pilgrim lamenting the loss of the Second Temple. A childhood encounter with him inspires the great medieval poet, Judah Halevi, to journey to Jerusalem. Heine's depiction of this meeting transforms the Wandering Jew legend from a Christian conversion story into a paean to Jewish faith. In "Jehuda ben Halevy," the voices of the Wandering Jew, Halevi, and generations of Jewish worshippers blend together in a lamentations tradition that reaches back to the Psalms. Heine depicts this poetic heritage as endlessly rejuvenating, just like the Wandering Jew's black-tipped beard. Prayer, song, and faith endure despite suffering and loss, forming an endless chain of which the poem and the poet Heine himself become a part.

Heine's representation of Jewish voices in "Jehuda ben Halevy" is mercurial, shifting continually between individual and collective and past and present. This stunning poetic effect is perhaps purposeful, but could also be due to the conditions of its composition. Struck with a debilitating illness in 1847, Heine was completely bedridden during his last years. His final poems, created through a haze of pain and opium, stand as a remarkable testament to his talent and his will.

During this last, difficult phase of his life, Heine's contemporaries observed, sometimes critically, that he had returned to Judaism. Heine's response? He did not need to return to Judaism because he had, in fact, never left it.[iv] Heine's quip comes to us secondhand, but I see it supported in Heine's treatment of the Wandering Jew. Heine's insight into the Wandering Jew legend in that early letter provides a Jewish perspective. In just a few deft sentences, Heine shows how Christian views of Jews—as mythical converts or simple merchants—render Jewish individuals as hollow objects of fear and scorn. In response to this unending prejudice, Heine's final treatment of the Wandering Jew transforms him from an object into an agent who speaks for the Jewish collective. This Wandering Jew is a thinking, feeling being whose singular yearning contains that of generations. In Heine's verse, the legend's Christian triumphalism becomes a mere ripple within a large, rich, resilient, and never-surrendered heritage.

Heine's is a tale of conversion imposed that never actually took.

LISA LAMPERT-WEISSIG *teaches Literature at UC San Diego, where she holds the Katzin Chair in Jewish Civilization. Her most recent book is* Instrument of Memory: Encounters with the Wandering Jew *(University of Michigan Press, 2024).*

i Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A History of Jews in Germany, 1743–1933* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 29.

ii Heinrich Heine, *Säkularausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1970), 20:265.

iii Heinrich Heine, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine, trans. Hal Draper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 662.

iv Ernst Pawel, *The Poet Dying* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 88.

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My Mother and Mary O'Malley's *Oy Vay Maria* (1977): How a BBC TV Play Spoke to Its Viewers

Sue Vice

After nearly half a century, I still vividly remember a family viewing of *Oy Vay Maria*, Mary O'Malley's BBC television play from 1977. It made my mother, Elizabeth, cry, because it seemed to tell her story. As the title suggests, the play is a culture-clash comedy of an unusual kind, depicting the conversion of a Catholic woman, Dymphna McLaughlin (Cheryl Hall), to Judaism after marrying her Jewish husband, Martin Perlman (Robert Whelan).

As if such a topic weren't radical enough for 1970s British viewers, the play has an added twist. It shows the newly Jewish woman's enthusiasm and commitment to the religion and its observance, her Jewish-born husband unengaged by the ritual he thought he'd abandoned. The drama ends by depicting a Friday night Kiddush, the benediction recited flawlessly by Dymphna, but her last words are addressed to her reluctant husband whose Hebrew she has to correct: "Oh, *Martin*!," she reproaches.

The plot of *Oy Vay Maria* is indeed a version of my mother Elizabeth's real-life story. Born in the small Scottish town of St. Andrews and brought up in the Church of Scotland, Elizabeth converted to Judaism in 1969, at London's Westminster Reform Synagogue. It was a labour of love for her that my father Tony, raised in the close-knit Jewish community of Hull, had not expected. My siblings and I only recently discovered that he had dissuaded Elizabeth from the Orthodox conversion she really wanted. There is some wry humour in the fact that Tony must have imagined he'd left behind all the Jewish observance that suddenly reappeared in his own home.

A bit like Dymphna urging her husband to take part in the Kiddush, the only serious argument between our parents during our childhood took place about a seder meal: my mother was stressed about getting the details right, my father claiming it was not worth the trouble. But

Elizabeth always said that her path to Judaism began through finding the siddur my father had been given on his bar mitzvah.

I think Tony came to value having a Jewish family again, since all his children became so when Elizabeth converted, even if he was never reconciled to the religious aspects.

Elizabeth always said that her path to Judaism began through finding the siddur my father had been given on his bar mitzvah. She had recently lost a beloved aunt, and gained the solace that she couldn't find elsewhere from reading the Jewish liturgy. In *Oy Vay Maria*, Dymphna is likewise shown becoming "Jewish by choice" for its own sake (*lishmah*) even if occasioned by marriage. Although in the play conversion is presented as a way to persuade her skeptical father-in-law Harry (Sydney Tafler) to help the newlyweds buy a house, Dymphna's face lights up when she says she's "got a feeling" about Judaism that impels her to embrace it.

My mother, while highly valuing the religious observance, adopted in addition a full range of "Jewish characteristics" even—and especially—when they were not part of her own history. Our parents shared Yiddish jokes and loved watching Marx Brothers films, donated to Jewish chari-

Screenshot of Dymphna's Kiddush from Oy Vay Maria *(1977). Courtesy of the author*

ties, and gravitated toward Jewish social life. Although their selective approach to keeping kosher exasperated their offspring, my mother bought worsht and jars of Mrs Ellswood's pickles from the kosher counter at Oxford Street's Selfridges as if she'd been brought up on them.

Adopting social habits as an extension of the religious conversion might make us rethink the very question of what it means to be Jewish and how it is passed on. The millennia-long reality of conversion affirms that Jewishness is a cultural as much as an ethnic legacy, in Amos Oz's words, "not a bloodline but a textline."[i] In *Oy Vay Maria*, the objections of Martin's father—including his assertion that "if you're Jewish, you're Jewish!" and dismissing any notion of a "certificate" of conversion—are subverted in this way. Dymphna, too, enacts elements of what her husband's cousin Lionel (Harry Landis) calls "a way of life" beyond religious observance. She bakes honey cake, calls her husband a "schlemiel" when he knocks her Jewish-related books off the shelf, and starts to sound like her aspirational mother-in-law Renée (Stella Moray), with whom she now shares the name Mrs. Perlman, when urging Martin to better himself by taking evening classes.

My mother, Elizabeth, joined a list of distinguished convertees in Britain, including such contemporaries as the actors Elizabeth Taylor and Felicity Kendal, musician Jacqueline du Pré, and the celebrity Mandy Rice Davies. That is in addition to the many converts who are pillars of communities throughout the United Kingdom, not least the Sheffield Reform shul to which I belong.

Yet, despite the widespread reality of conversion in Britain, O'Malley's play is unusual in representing its successful completion. While alternatives to the normative Ashkenazic and heterosexual context have been depicted, in Adam Baroukh's short fiction film *The Outer Circle* (2017), about a British Sephardic family of Iraqi origin, and the reality-TV show *My Big Gay Jewish Conversion*, addressing the Catholic Simon's contemplating conversion to marry his Jewish partner Matthew (2017), the idea of becoming Jewish does not come to fruition in either. Mary O'Malley herself, best known for the long-running West End play *Once a Catholic* about a

... I wonder if my mother's tears on seeing its first broadcast were not just those of grief but of recognition.

Catholic girls' school in London, had considered conversion on marrying a Jewish man. Since they later divorced and she didn't convert, the rabbi's observation in *Oy Vay Maria* that "Catholics often make very good Jews" sounds like wish fulfilment.

Rewatching *Oy Vay Maria now*—it's available on YouTube, highly recommended as a time capsule of the Jewish (and Catholic) aspects of British life and the era's actors—I wonder if my mother's tears on seeing its first broadcast were not just those of grief but of recognition. For all the play's gentle comedy as typical of the mid-century "golden age" of British television drama, the spectacle of Dymphna's real engagement with Jewishness and the detail of the ceremony in which it culminates, under the rabbi's supportive guidance, is not just genuinely moving but inspiring.

SUE VICE *is professor of English Literature at the University of Sheffield, UK, where she works in the areas of contemporary literature, film, and Holocaust studies. Her latest book is* Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah' Outtakes: Holocaust Rescue and Resistance *(2021). She is currently writing a study of Holocaust representation in popular British and Irish fiction.*

i Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2012), 1.

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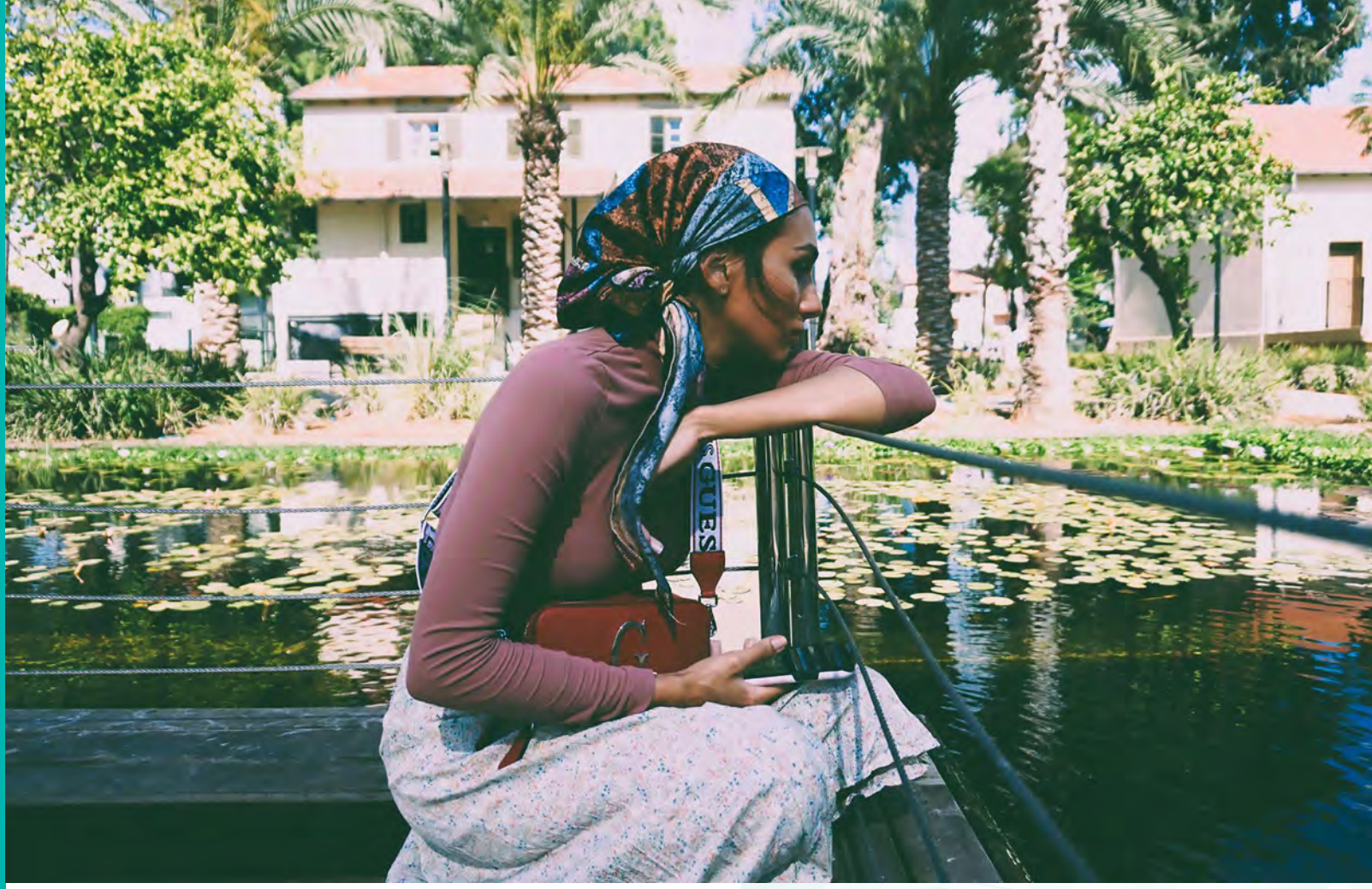


Odel during an interview in Tel Aviv. Like the other interviewees, she is originally from Colombia. Today she lives near Jerusalem, together with her Israeli husband and children. Photo by the author.

Becoming Jewish? The Experiences of Colombian Converts in Israel

Alicia Vergara

When Hadassah moved to Israel with the intent of undergoing an Orthodox conversion, she embarked on a journey fraught with bureaucratic hurdles and cultural challenges. Like a growing number of Colombians, and Latin Americans more broadly, Hadassah had been on a religious search for years. Born into a Catholic family, she had experimented with various smaller Christian, mostly Evangelical, denominations, and had eventually encountered Judaism and become sure that she wanted to be Jewish. Having already converted to Judaism in Colombia, Hadassah sent her documents to the Jewish Agency, only to be told her conversion was invalid. This moment marked the beginning of her complex relationship with Israeli religious institutions and her quest for acceptance in her new homeland.

Hadassah's story is not unique among Jewish immigrants, also known as *ʿolim*, who navigate the complexities of Israeli society and its religious frameworks. In fact, her story is quite emblematic for various accounts I came across for my research on Colombian converts to Judaism in Israel. Israel's commitment to assisting *ʿolim* is evident through various benefits and support systems available to both Jews who are recognized according to Jewish law,

Despite feeling generally accepted by Israeli society, many undergo Orthodox conversions to achieve legal recognition and solidify their Jewish identity.

Halakhah, and those who are not. However, nonhalakhic Jews, like Hadassah, often face confusion regarding the state's emphasis on religiosity and its implications for their personal identities and legal statuses. This is especially the case for female converts, which is why the following stories focus on the experiences of specifically Colombian women who converted to Judaism and are trying to make Israel their Jewish home.

Determined to find a legitimate conversion process, Hadassah, the woman we met at the beginning of this story, had decided to convert to Judaism while studying at a midrashah (educational institution for religious Jewish women after high school) in Jerusalem. The midrashah, closely affiliated with the Israeli Rabbinate, seemed like the ideal place to oversee her conversion. However, she soon found the institution to be far more conservative than anticipated, demanding strict adherence to *ẓniʾut* (modesty) and unquestioning obedience. Feeling increasingly alienated, Hadassah left the midrashah and relocated to the United States. After a few months, she returned to Israel, drawn back by a *shidduch* that had been proposed to her. She underwent a *giyur le-ḥumra* (one of the strictest forms of Orthodox conversion) in Miami and married in a Haredi ceremony in Israel. Yet, her excitement quickly turned to a sense of imprisonment within a lifestyle she found oppressive and incompatible with her true self. She was expected to keep to herself and to let her husband make most of the decisions for her—a situation that surprised her, as she had thought her husband would appreciate the experience and opinions she would bring into their home as someone who had lived independently in various countries. But that was not the case. To make things worse, she felt alienated from her new surroundings. Unable to read books she usually enjoyed as they were not considered "adequate" for a religious woman, unable to speak and read Hebrew or Yiddish, and unable to make friends in the tight-knit society she suddenly found herself in, she began slipping into increasing despair.

After eight months, Hadassah sought refuge in a women's shelter and asked for a get. She left Israel once more, only to return later, this time as a secular Jew. She resumed wearing her pre-midrashah clothing and ceased observing Shabbat and other practices. By befriending nonreligious Israeli Jews, Hadassah embraced a secular Jewish identity, feeling finally at home as a Jewish, Israeli, and secular individual.

Hadassah's experiences highlight the broader challenges faced by many *ʿolim*. Despite feeling generally accepted by Israeli society, many undergo Orthodox conversions to achieve legal recognition and solidify their Jewish identity. According to some scholars, Israel actively promotes conversion to maintain a Jewish demographic majority. It is estimated that approximately 2,000 conversions occur annually, often supported by state institutions and organizations. Some have criticized that many of these conversions take place despite the nonreligious motivations behind many of them—to be accepted completely into Jewish Israeli society.

Out of the nine interviewees for my research project focusing on those Colombian converts who today live in Israel, seven completed Orthodox conversions in Israel, one was still in the process at the time of the interview, and two had opted against it. According to two of the male interviewees, the Orthodox conversion certificate is crucial to their sense of Jewish identity and legal rights, such as the ability to marry in Israel. This necessity is underscored by Israel's rigid legal framework concerning religious identity, as seen in the case of another Colombian woman, Sarah, I encountered during my investigation in Israel. In Sarah's case, her Orthodox conversion was essential for achieving legal independence. Both she and her husband had converted to Judaism in Colombia. But only her husband's additional conversion by a renowned rabbi in the United States was recognized by Israel when the two began their aliyah process. Only then did Sarah discover that many

The journeys of these ʿolim reflect broader questions about identity, belonging, and the freedom to choose one's path in a world where labels and boundaries are increasingly fluid..

Orthodox conversions were not accepted for aliyah by the State of Israel, as most Latin American Orthodox conversion certificates are not recognized by the Israeli Rabbinate. So when the relationship between Sarah and her husband deteriorated upon their arrival in Israel and they separated, she asked him not to divorce her, as her immigration status depended on her status as the wife of an *ʿoleh*.

The majority of these *ʿolim* who converted to Judaism before immigrating to Israel did not grow up in Jewish households but adopted Jewish traditions later in life. This shift required them to navigate new cultural and behavioral codes, sometimes conflicting with their previous world view. Their journey often involved reconciling their past identities with their new Jewish Israeli identities, leading to feelings of Otherness. Despite identifying as Israelis, they encountered challenges internalizing specific cultural norms, such as perceived Israeli rudeness or loud behavior.

The Colombian converts' integration illustrates the complexities of maintaining primary socialization habits while adapting to new cultural contexts. While most interviewees tried to distance themselves from other Latin Americans, saying that they preferred Israeli friends, only two interviewees, Rivkah and Odel, seemed to actively maintain connections with Latin Americans. A notable observation Rivkah made was that Israeli Jews could be secular while retaining their Jewish identity, a privilege, she thought, that was not available for converts like her. Many of the interviewees seemed to emphasize their religious observance to justify their immigration, suggesting that secularism might undermine their initial religious motivations. Hadassah's unique secular identity only developed after completing a widely accepted conversion, embracing her Jewish ancestry, and passing through the experience of Haredi life, which exemplifies the tension between which types of Jewish identity are available to converts.

The integration of Jewish immigrants in Israel is complex, shaped by the state's narrative of being a home for all Jews and the practical challenges immigrants face in creating a sense of belonging. It highlights the ongoing negotiation between old and new identities, as well as the importance of perceived acceptance by the host society in solidifying one's self-identification as Israeli. The experiences of Colombian converts in Israel demonstrate the intricate interplay of cultural, religious, and legal factors in their quest for integration and identity validation.

Through these stories, we see the evolving landscape of identity in Israel, where the traditional and the emerging coexist, often in tension. The journeys of these *ʿolim* reflect broader questions about identity, belonging, and the freedom to choose one's path in a world where labels and boundaries are increasingly fluid. What does it mean to be Jewish? To be Israeli? These are questions that Hadassah and many like her continue to navigate, shaping their lives and the fabric of Israeli society in the process.

ALICIA VERGARA *is a doctoral candidate in Oriental Studies (Hebrew and Jewish Studies) at University of Oxford's Wolfson College.*

José Gomes de Mello: A Bloody Mess

Monique Rodrigues Balbuena

Captain José Gomes de Mello (Porto Calvo, Freguesia do Cabo, Pernambuco, Brazil) was a Fidalgo (nobleman) of the Royal House and the document I am presenting here is part of his 1699 qualification dossier (*habilitação*) when he applied for the position of "Familiar of the Holy Office" in Brazil. From the mid-seventeenth century on, the Holy Office increasingly relied on a network of local agents that included *familiares*, laymen whose duty was to denounce offenders of the faith and confiscate their property, but who could also investigate and carry on arrests of anyone suspected of heresy. The *familiares* had considerable privileges and became relevant to the expansion of the Inquisition's powers in the colonial territory. This document reveals a crucial part of the process: the *diligence*, or investigation, of the postulant's and his wife's personal history and genealogy up to seven generations. *Familiares* had to be "Old Christian, clean of all race of infected nation." José Gomes de Mello fails on that count. Despite his nobility, the *diligences* uncover that he descends from Brites Mendes de Vasconcellos, a Velha, that is, the Old (1525–1620), whose parents were arrested and punished by the Inquisition in Lisbon, where her mother was burned at the stake.

This document helps us understand how the *diligences* worked. It acquires greater importance, and contributes to local Jewish history, as it is used to define Brites's genealogy and New Christian status. From the Commissioner's letter we learn what steps he took to research and document the lineage of the candidate's third grandmother, Brites Mendes de Vasconcellos. We learn that Brites's *converso* origins were well known by the locals and later admitted by the postulant: as a child she was taken to Brazil by Brites de Albuquerque, wife of Duarte Coelho de Albuquerque, donnee of the land. She married the Dutch Arnau de Holanda (1515–1614) circa 1535, in Olinda, Pernambuco. From the couple descended families of sugar plantation owners who became the landed aristocracy of the country. Brites Mendes's *converso* origins thus marked Brazil's foundational families in the northeast. This source also reveals the controlling mechanisms of the Portuguese Inquisition, since its operating ways changed over four centuries, and indicates the social importance of positions in the Holy Office.

In 2015 Spain and Portugal passed laws offering citizenship to descendants of Sephardic Jews who had been expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Since then, many people across the world delved into their genealogy to find an eligible connection. In Brazil, thousands of novice genealogists discovered that millions of Brazilians descend from Jews or *conversos*. A small portion of them is returning to Judaism. This document emphasizes how the origins of Brazil are marked by the presence and action of Jewish people, the original producers of sugar dating to the sixteenth century. A century later, their mercantile activity promoted integration of the Brazilian hinterlands, having thus a crucial role in the development of the nation.

Through this source we follow a historical reversal. It originally established genealogy in order to deny Gomes de Mello a position in the Holy Office. Today it is used by Brites Mendes's descendants to establish their *converso* genealogy and claim Spanish or Portuguese citizenship rights. It also demonstrates the tight-knit relationships among New Christian families by revealing, for example, that Gomes de Mello and his wife shared a common maternal grandfather.

Gomes de Mello's dossier plays a role in the story of American Jewish history: it ultimately evidences the deep connections between early Brazilian history and the fate of exiled or forcefully converted Jews, corroborating the intertwining of Brazilian and Sephardic history.

Text in illustration:

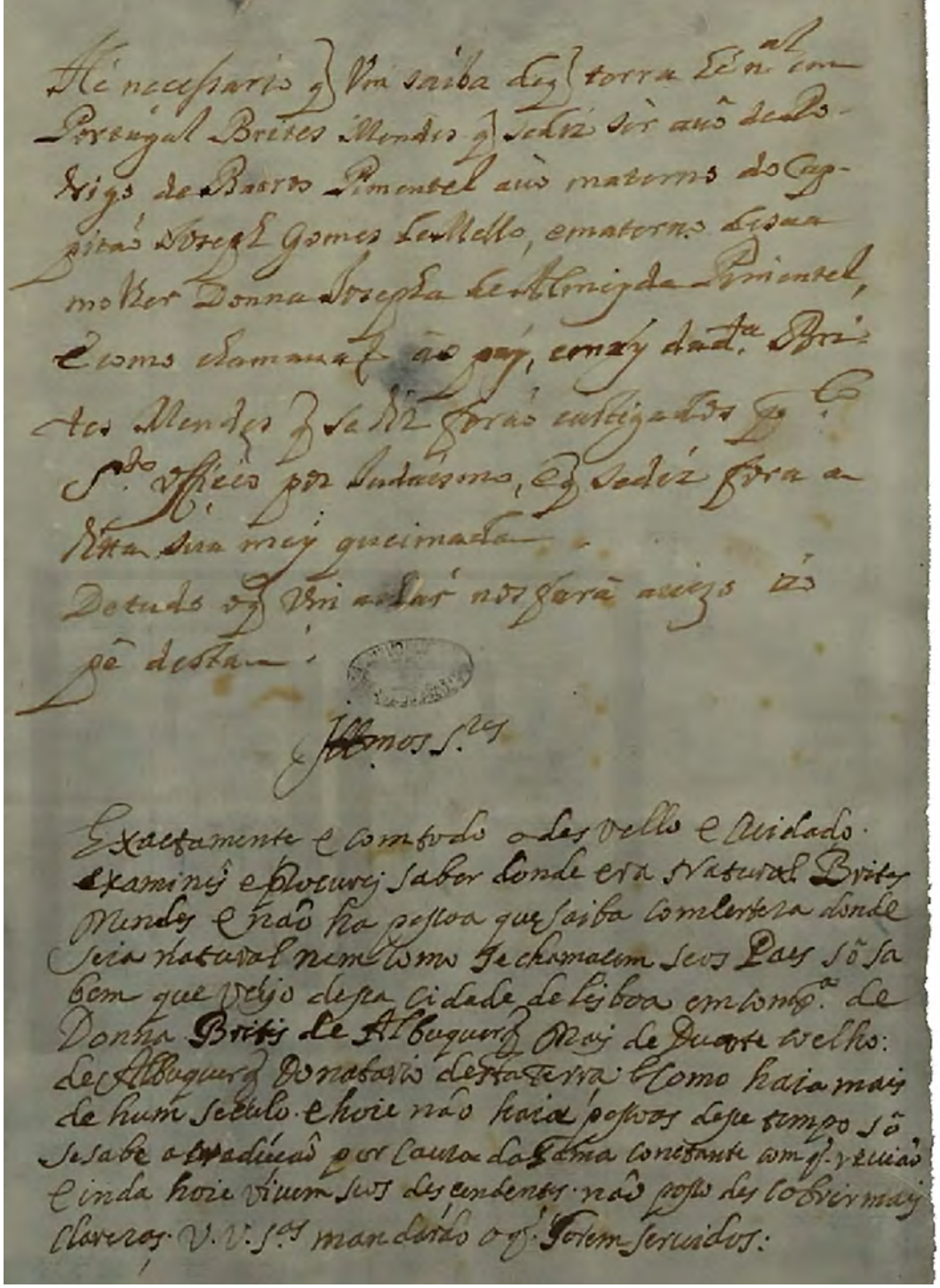
Hé necessario q V.m saiba de q terra hé natural em Portugal Brites Mendes que se diz ser avó de Rodrigo de Barros Pimentel, avô materno do Capitão Joseph Gomes de Mello, e materno de sua molher Donna Josepha [*sic*] de Almeyda Pimentel, e como chamavão ao pay, e may da dita Brites Mendes, que se diz forão castigados pelo Sto. Offício por Judaísmo, e que se diz fora a dita sua may queimada.

De tudo o que V.m. achar nos fará aviso ao que destaco.

Illmos. S.res

Exactamente e com todo o desvello e cuidado. Examinei e procurei saber donde era natural Brites Mendes e não ha pessoa que saiba com certeza donde seria natural nem como se chamavam seos paes. Sõ saben que veyo desta cidade de Lisboa em comp.a de Donna Brittes de Albuquerque, may de Duarte Coelho: de Albuquerque, Donatario desta terra. Como haja mais de hum seculo e hoje não haja pessoas desse tempo, sõ se sabe a tradição por causa da Fama constante com que vevião e inda hoje vivem seos descendentes. Não posso descobrir mais clarezas. V. V. Sas. mandarão o que Forem servidos:

O Comissario Manoel da Costa Ribeiro



Diligências de habilitação para o cargo de Familiar do Santo Ofício de José Gomes de Melo, casado com Dona Jerônima de Almeida PT-TT-TSO-CG-A-008-002-3263_M003

Translation (continued on next page)**:**

It is necessary that Your Grace know of what land in Portugal Brites Mendes is a native, who is said to be the grandmother of Rodrigo de Barros Pimentel, maternal grandfather of Captain Joseph Gomes de Mello, and maternal grandfather of his wife, Donna Josepha [sic] de Almeyda Pimentel, and what the names of said Brites Mendes's father and mother were, who are said to have been punished by the Holy Office for Judaism, the mother said to have been burned.

Of all that Your Grace finds, you will give us notice of what I point out.

Translation (continued from previous page)**:**

Most Distinguished Gentlemen,

Exactly and with all vigilance and care. I examined and sought to find out of where Brites Mendes is a native, and there is no one who knows for sure of where she was a native or what her parents' names were. They only know that she came from this city of Lisbon in company of Donna Brittes de Albuquerque, mother of Duarte Velho de Albuquerque, donee of this land. Since more than a century has elapsed and there are no longer people from that time, we only know this tradition because of the enduring fame with which her descendants lived and continue to live to this day. I cannot discover anything more that provides clarity to this matter. Your Lordships send [what might serve you.]

Commissioner Manoel da Costa Ribeiro

Further Resources:

Aldair Carlos Rodrigues, "Formação e atuação da rede de comissários do Santo Ofício em Minas colonial," *Revista Brasileira de História* 29, no. 57 (2009): 145–64.

Antônio José Victoriano Borges da Fonseca, *Nobiliarchia Pernambucana* (Rio de Janeiro: Bibliotheca Nacional, 1935).

Antonio Otaviano Vieira Jr., *A Inquisição e o Sertão* (Fortaleza: Edições Demócrito Rocha, 2014).

Evaldo Cabral de Mello, *O nome e o sangue: uma parábola familiar no Pernambuco colonial* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2000).

José Antonio Gonçalves de Mello, preface to *Primeira visitação do Santo Ofício às partes do Brasil; Denunciações e Confissões de Pernambuco 1593-1595* (Recife: FUNDARPE, 1984).

MONIQUE RODRIGUES BALBUENA *is associate professor of Comparative Literature and director of graduate studies at the University of Oregon. Author of* Homeless Tongues: Poetry and Languages of the Sephardic Diaspora *(Stanford University Press, 2016), Balbuena obtained Portuguese and Spanish citizenships through the 2015 Sephardic Law.*

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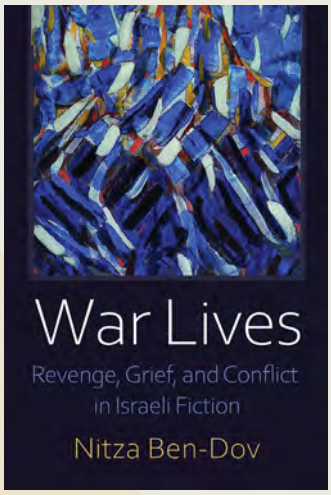

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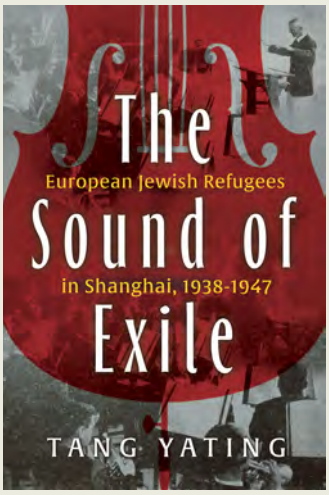

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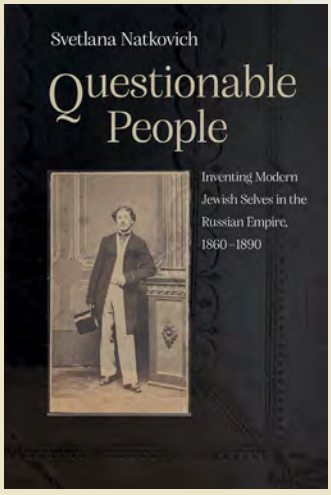

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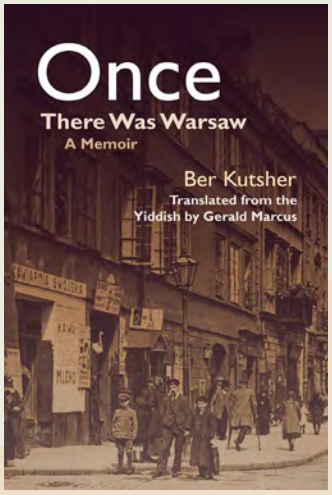

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Don't Call Me a Convert. I Am a Trans-Jew

Luise Hirsch

I have never experienced gender dysphoria. But inexplicably, "transsexuals," as they were then called, have fascinated me since I was a teenager. Now I know: their stories resemble my own, with a twist. Something about my identity assigned at birth felt wrong and didn't match what I always knew to be my authentic self: Jewish. Ultimately, I became a proper halakhic *giyoret* under the auspices of Conservative Judaism and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. But with hindsight, I prefer the term "Jewish identity affirmation" to "conversion," according to the same logic that has replaced the term "sex change" with "gender affirmation surgery." You don't change. You simply affirm publicly what you have always known to be the truth about yourself. Seen like that, I am a trans-Jew. From birth.

I am from Germany but did my *giyur* in the United States. Over time, I tried on different terms, from the well-established "Jew-by-choice" to my own inventions (as far as I know), "first-generation Jew" or "immigrant to Judaism." Not coincidentally, "first-generation Jew" came to me while I was an active member of a Reconstructionist congregation in Philadelphia. In a country of immigrants, the metaphor simply suggested itself. I was a foreigner anyway and my acquired Jewishness was just one more thing that made me stick out. By claiming "immigrant status" as a Jew, I cheekily reminded my American friends that their forebears, too, had once been strangers in a new land. If this really helped my cause, I couldn't say. What I do know is that the Jews in the United States were invariably welcoming, curious, and open-minded. If they felt suspicious regarding my motivation, they never let it show. It is thanks to them that I developed a modicum of trans-Jewish pride.

I would badly need it in Germany where I ultimately returned and found a home in a small, non-Orthodox congregation in Frankfurt. A minority within the largely Orthodox mainstream in Germany, we are struggling for recognition and equality, an uphill battle of long standing. Perhaps this is the reason I have encountered nothing but friendliness in my synagogue and feel truly welcome there.

But in the wider community, I am eyed with suspicion, subtle and otherwise, by those who were assigned their Jewish identity at birth and usually view trans-Jews with barely veiled hostility. One of the most blatant cases of unabashed trans-Jew baiting took place only two years ago in a synagogue in Berlin that I sometimes attend. The long-time cantor went public with a scurrilous article in a renowned national newspaper slandering the trans-Jews (not *her* chosen term, obviously) in her own congregation.[i] To then hear a Jewish friend, a nationally famous life-long activist against racism and antisemitism, defend this article to my face has cut me to the core.

> *What hurts me most is not the supremacist attitude but the complete lack of curiosity, friendly or even unfriendly, about my motives for affirming my Jewish identity.*

No matter how sincere, credible, and steadfast we have just been declared by an entire body of rabbis, gaining the social acceptance of our fellow Jews will be difficult.

That Jews should feel contempt for all things German, perhaps especially *because* of living in that very country, is practically self-evident. However, that they reserve a double dose of contempt and hostility for us trans-Jews begs the question why. Or does it? I never studied racism closely but even my cursory knowledge is enough to make me see the parallels in the discourse: We are genuine, you are impostors. We came by our Jewishness honestly, you snuck in. We are the "natural-born citizens" of Judaism, you are illegal "immigrants" into our territory. And when it comes to "doing Jewish," you are simply trying too hard: xenophobia meets contempt for the social climber. The latter point revives a specific motif of nineteenth-century antisemitism: the accusation that Jews acculturate and blend in too successfully, which was perceived as both laughable *and* fraudulent.

What hurts me most is not the supremacist attitude but the complete lack of curiosity, friendly or even unfriendly, about my motives for affirming my Jewish identity. Not that I actually have more to offer than helpless tautologies: "I know it to be my authentic, true self and have felt this way from childhood" or perhaps, stretching the transgender metaphor a little further, "I am a Jewish soul trapped in the wrong body." There really is no accounting for taste, love, or indeed for trans-Jewishness. But being asked would be nice anyway.

The comparison with the transgender community begs another question: Who decides about the legitimacy of trans-Jews? Self-declaration seems to be the trend of the future when it comes to gender. What about trans-Jewishness? Should self-declaration suffice or is a rabbinic *giyur* necessary? But ultimately, self-declaration will always be at the core of any *giyur* too. The *beit din* cannot "make" anyone Jewish. It can only bear witness to the sincerity, credibility, and steadfastness of us trans-Jews who, by petitioning, declare our innermost selves to be Jewish. From birth.

Giyur completed, we are on our own in Germany. No matter how sincere, credible, and steadfast we have just been declared by an entire body of rabbis, gaining the social acceptance of our fellow Jews will be difficult. Some may eventually welcome us, many will continue to see us as frauds or at best a joke. The most important thing is to remain disarmingly honest. I could invent for myself a Jewish family background to answer prying questions from not-so well-meaning fellow German Jews. But I refuse to fall into that trap. I have come out with my truth and I must continue to stand by it. It's not easy being a trans-Jew. But it sure beats living a lie.

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i Avitall Gerstetter, "Warum die wachsende Zahl der Konvertiten ein Problem für das Judentum ist," *Die Welt*, September 8, 2022, https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/plus240364053/Avitall-Gerstetter-Konversionen-koennen-Problem-fuers-Judentum-werden.html. For commentary, see, e.g., Nava Anne Grant, "Meet the Berlin Synagogue Cantor Who Claims There Are Too Many Jews in Germany," Haaretz, September 15, 2022, https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2022-09-15/ty-article-opinion/.highlight/meet-the-berlin-cantor-who-claims-there-are-too-many-jews-in-germany/00000183-3b0b-dbd6-a1bb-3f9b9fa80000 or Katja Vehlow, "Who decides who is Jewish enough in Germany?," Times of Israel blog, September 20, 2022, https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/who-decides-who-is-jewish-enough-in-germany/.

Jewish Nightmares: Conversions to Judaism in Germany, and the Problem of Otherness

Joel Swanson

In August 2022, Avitall Gerstetter, *hazzan* for Berlin's largest liberal synagogue, was fired. This marked a rapid fall for Germany's first female cantor. Her crime? Gerstetter published a column in the widely read German newspaper *Die Welt* lamenting the dramatic increase in German converts to Judaism—who then proceeded to assume leadership roles in the community, sometimes telling Jews by birth they were living their identities wrongly.[i] Gerstetter, daughter of a convert father and a Jewish mother, conceded, "I know the *giyur* is not supposed to be talked about,"[ii] alluding to a talmudic law forbidding public differentiation between converts and those born into the community.[iii] Yet some German synagogues are now 80 percent converts,[iv] creating Jewish communities which Gerstetter feared now lack any transmission of intergenerational Jewish memory and culture, leaving only a deracinated intellectual Judaism in its place.[v] In her words, German converts create "a new, theoretical Judaism, almost a completely new religion … a 'soulless' Judaism."[vi]

But Gerstetter's concerns went beyond this loss of cultural memory. She accused German converts of fleeing responsibility for their family's actions under Nazism. Such converts, "to compensate for an SS grandfather," move "from the perpetrator family to a new, Jewish family construct as a bizarre form of abstract reparation: indulgence conversion."[vii] In short, Gerstetter accused some Germans of confusing their "personal disorientation," an identity crisis of our contemporary culture, with the need to embrace Otherness, conflated here with Jewishness, and as a result, of deciding to convert to Judaism as a means to give "form" to express this alienation. Yet this move, according to Gerstetter, allows them to conveniently escape guilt from familial identification with the perpetrators of Nazism's crimes by identifying with the victims instead.[viii]

The controversy became sufficiently heated that prominent German Jews joined in.

The controversy became sufficiently heated that prominent German Jews joined in. Members of Gerstetter's synagogue likened her stance to "the educated middle-class salon antisemitism of the nineteenth century," and several compared their conversions to gender transitions undergone by transgender individuals.[ix] Rabbi Andreas Nachama called Gerstetter's words "an outrage," for "the *gerim* are an asset."[x] Rabbi Zsolt Balla said reckoning with a Nazi past is not disqualifying as a motive for conversion, citing the talmudic story of Haman's descendants becoming rabbis.[xi]

Yet others were more sympathetic to Gerstetter. Josef Schuster, chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, agreed that when converts assume positions of authority in synagogues, "it can definitely lead to problems," because "being Jewish is not just a question of status, but also a question of young people's socialization, which cannot simply be learned."[xii] Barbara Steiner, who authored *Die Inszenierung des Jüdischen* (The staging of Jewishness) about German conversions after 1945,[xiii] herself a convert, claimed conversions were "out of proportion … a trauma symptom" of Germany's post-Shoah historical reckoning.[xiv] She called for rabbis to assess converts' motives more strictly, for "you cannot give this Nazi legacy away with a bath in the mikveh."[xv]

Neue Synagoge, Oranienburger Strasse, Berlin-Mitte.
Photo by Ansgar Koreng / CC BY 3.0 (DE)

Just as a convert can never truly understand the Otherness that comes from being Jewish, one born into this legacy can never escape it.

Rabbi Walter Rothschild went further, identifying Jewishness with trauma imposed from outside, which converts can never viscerally understand. In a follow-up in *Die Welt*, he wrote: "A Jew is someone who has Jewish nightmares. Many Jews react particularly sensitively to emerging threats—be they threats against Jews or against Israel—that non-Jews cannot yet see. They react sensitively to changes in the political atmosphere. They

The position of the Jew as Other is marked by an inherent paradox.

come from fragmented families who often had to flee (when they could), who speak multiple languages and have relatives on multiple continents. They are constantly aware of their family history and this can be a great burden."[xvi] For Rabbi Rothschild, just as a convert cannot inherit such "Jewish nightmares," so, too, does a child born to a Jewish mother have no ability to escape them; even those who have "chosen to leave Judaism" may be "violently reminded of their status by various racist governments, inquisitions, and Aryan laws."[xvii] Just as a convert can never truly understand the Otherness that comes from being Jewish, one born into this legacy can never escape it.

If through their historical experience, the Jewish people function as the paradigmatic oppressed Other, it is only natural that others who identify with this marginality might claim the identity of Jew for themselves. Steiner points to the disproportionate number of queer Germans among converts,[xviii] while Gerstetter notes that converts have disproportionate histories of childhood trauma and abuse.[xix] If the historical experience of the Jewish people enables them to serve as paradigmatic exemplars of Otherness, this threatens to erase the very specificity that defines Jewish Otherness in the first place, turning the Jewish body into a mere symbol that any German traumatized by history, or sexuality, or alienation, might claim. Yet Rabbi Rothschild's description of the Jewish people as those "constantly aware of their family history," to the point of being haunted by nightmares of historical persecutions through which they did not personally live,[xx] underscores that the position of Jew as Other retains its power only if the Jews remain a people apart.

The position of the Jew as Other is thus marked by an inherent paradox. Perhaps inhabiting the identity of the Other for non-Jewish European society means surrendering control over the boundaries of one's own identity to that very same non-Jewish society. If the Jew becomes a mere symbol of Otherness, abstracted from the marked (perhaps circumcised) body of the living Jew, then the Jew ceases to be Other in a stable sense.

The tension between the unique experience of Jewish history and the symbolism it plays in the surrounding society may never be fully resolvable, and it is precisely in that paradox as well as in the irreconcilability of differences that this tension draws its power.

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i Avitall Gerstetter, "Warum die wachsende Zahl der Konvertiten ein Problem für das Judentum ist," *Die Welt*, August 9, 2022. All translations from German are the author's own.

ii Ibid.

iii Sandra Borchert, "Der Fall Avitall Gerstetter-Wie eine Kantorin die Jüdischen Gemeinden in Deutschland erschüttert," *Raawi: Das Magazin für Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland*, September 9, 2022.

iv Jan Alexander Casper, "Unzulässige Maßregelung – Kantorin geht gegen Kündigung vor," *Die Welt*, August 25, 2022.

v Toby Axelrod, "Are Too Many Germans Converting to Judaism? The Debate Is Roiling Germany's Jewish Community," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 6, 2022.

vi Gerstetter, "Warum."

vii Ibid.

viii Ibid.

ix Casper.

x Borchert.

xi Ibid.

xii Casper.

xiii Barbara Steiner, *Die Inszenierung des Jüdischen (Göttingen: Wallstein*, 2015).

xiv Steiner, as cited in Borchert.

xv Ibid.

xvi Walter Rothschild, "Nur in Deutschland sagen Konvertiten Juden, was sie zu tun haben," *Die Welt*, August 23, 2022.

xvii Ibid.

xviii Barbara J. Steiner, "Between Guilt and Repression—Conversion to Judaism after the Shoah," in *Contemporary Jewish Reality in Germany and Its Reflection in Film, ed. Claudia Simone Dorchain and Felice Naomi Wonnenberg* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 135.

xix Gerstetter.

xx Rothschild.

Jew-ish

Jim Bunton

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14). I shall become who I am. My journey of becoming was ignited by a curiosity sparked by my Evangelical Christian background. The stories I heard and the teachings in my Christian seminary were not only about Jesus but also about Sarah, Leah, Rachel, and Rebecca. My teachers told stories like Anita Diamant or Geraldine Brooks. These stories connected with me; they invoke in me memories of my mom, who fought for a child, her only child, whose disabilities were a constant source of anxiety for her, and who was endangered by his father's other children and the medical establishment. This boy felt at ease and comfortable with women and girls, as opposed to the macho men of his father. My mother wasn't Jewish, yet she had a connection with these Jewish women from long ago. These were Jewish mothers and Jewish stories. I wanted to know more.

I started attending Kabbalat Shabbat services on Friday evening; it became the highlight of my week. The first Kabbalat Shabbat service I went to was with my seminary class under the tutelage of a professor who made Jewish stories come to life. While intrigued, I also felt lost, unable to understand the Hebrew, and had difficulty following the order of service.

A few years later, I came back. Now, it was different. Now, these prayers and songs quieted the sufferings from my mother's passing. I connected with the prayers and the songs, especially Lekha Dodi; I envisioned myself running out in the fields of Safed to greet the Sabbath Queen. The songs and prayers calmed my mind like the Ritalin the doctors prescribed when I was a child. I connected to a Jewish story that stretched centuries. A few years ago, I was sitting in the synagogue after the Pesach seder, listening to a tired elderly woman suddenly become vibrant and young while sharing her story of how her Jewish mother and father met and realizing that the only four people left in the synagogue were her, me, my wife, and her caregiver. These were not my stories, but I felt a need to share these stories.

> During the dark years of the COVID pandemic, I discovered an opportunity to encounter Judaism in safe Zoom spaces. For the first time, I no longer felt like an unwelcome stranger in Jewish spaces.

As my desire for Judaism grew, I wanted to share Judaism with everyone I knew. In 2017, the local Jewish Federation community relations director suggested collaborating on a monthly Jewish film series for an interfaith audience called "Meet Me on the Bridge." Memorable about these events were the beautiful colored tablecloths, Hershey kisses scattered on the tables, and the delightful and thoughtful conversation that followed the films. The series was a great success and created opportunities for lively connections among people of different backgrounds. However, the film series ended with the withdrawal of support from the Jewish Federation. I felt both angry and confused, not understanding why. Looking back, I understand now that the mistrust was legitimate. My anger turned to sadness. I thought I had found the space for becoming but was pushed away. I desperately sought a space for becoming, but I was hesitant, and still am, about conversion. Mom had instilled in me a love of my Christian roots.

There were many reasons for my love affair with Judaism: I fell in love first through stories, then with the commitment to social justice about which the prophets spoke, with the creativity of the rabbis who reshaped Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, and with the ways young, feminist, and queer leaders are reshaping Judaism today. My enthusiasm led me to

Portrait of the author's mother. Photo by Nina Bondarenko

pursue a doctor of science in Jewish Studies at Spertus Institute of Jewish Learning and Leadership. This decision opened me to new opportunities, discoveries, and an insatiable desire to learn and experience Judaism.

During the dark years of the COVID pandemic, I discovered an opportunity to encounter Judaism in safe Zoom spaces. For the first time, I no longer felt like an unwelcome stranger in Jewish spaces. There may be something about the magic of Zoom in overcoming space and time to allow for becoming. I attended my first AJS Conference virtually in 2020. I have cherished involvement in SVARA, whose mission is to empower queer and trans people to expand Torah and tradition through the study of the Talmud. SVARA is the rabbis' concept of moral intuition that comes from immersion in Jewish learning. The zeal and creativity these young queer and trans-Jews bring to Torah gave me the feeling that I was standing at Sinai. My teachers and *ḥevrutot* (study partners) see the expansiveness of the Torah, not its limitations. I also no longer saw my limitations but my possibilities. I began to question the notion of fixed identities and fixed genders. I understand that although I present as a man, my gender identity is fluid. My understanding of gender as a spectrum and expression as distinct from identity is essential to my sense of myself. This understanding has begun to elucidate for me my Jew ishness. Is my Jew ishness an expression, identity, both, or neither? I am not sure of the answer. For now, I relish in my Jew ishness.

I now enjoy teaching Judaism as part of a world religion class at Des Moines Area Community College and the Iowa Correctional Center for Women, serving on the Association of Jewish Studies Film Committee and the Gender Justice Caucus. I still cherish returning to my virtual place of learning as often as I can. Where it is ok to be Jew-ish without being Jewish. When I make and bake my challah on Friday afternoon and light the Shabbat candles on Friday night, I am thankful for those I stand with from the past, present, and the future; afterward, when I hear Lekha Dodi as if, "My beloved spoke to me … arise my darling …" (Song of Songs 10:2) I feel the warm embrace of a lover and a friend. "I am comforted …" (Genesis 24:67). Even though I am not Jewish, I am becoming.

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Conversion and the Persistence of Difference

Vincent Calabrese

A major concern of Jewish communities is whether or how to make themselves more welcoming to converts. However, there is often something in the conversations about how to go about doing so that I—a convert myself, as well as a scholar of Jewish law and theology—find wanting. Such conversations sometimes proceed as if the primary barriers to integration were personal prejudice and insensitivity, and as if the ideal is that no distinctions at all ought to be recognized between converts and born Jews. Often, it is (mistakenly) asserted to be a requirement of Jewish law that a convert should never be reminded of their status or treated differently.

While I do not wish to deny the role that personal insensitivity plays in making converts feel out of place in Jewish institutions—I lost count of the number of times I have been asked, in social, religious, and professional contexts, to "explain how I got that name," often within moments of an introduction—in my opinion, the problem runs deeper. The tensions felt by converts and their fellow Jews are the result of tensions—probably ineluctable—between the different strands, equally normative for Rabbinic Judaism, which define the different ways a person can be Jewish.

In my own teaching, the text which I have found to be the most fascinating and provocative exemplar of these tensions is Michael Wyschogrod's *The Body of Faith* and his theology of conversion. For Wyschogrod, Judaism has a central point around which all revolves. This is what he calls "corporeal election"—that God chose to be present in the world through the "sanctification of a natural family … the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[i] A number of corollaries follow: that the very bodies of the Jewish people are holy; that one's place in the covenant cannot be resigned; that all Jews are indissolubly bound to one another no matter what differences they may have. For our purposes, the most important one is that "conversion to Judaism should not be possible." What corporeal election means is that "God chose the patriarchs and their descendants as his people and this people, as a whole, constitute a priestly class into which one either is or is not born." The ethnocentricity of this conception of Judaism has earned Wyschogrod much criticism. Yet it is not hard to find rabbinic sources that support Wyschogrod's insistence on the irreplaceability of descent—Mishnah Bikkurim, for example, shockingly rules that a convert, when praying, cannot use the liturgical phrase "our God and God of our ancestors," because his ancestors were not chosen by God.

Yet Wyschogrod must also accommodate the plain fact that Rabbinic Judaism assumes and asserts that conversion to Judaism *is* possible. Wyschogrod's solution to this dilemma is to suggest that conversion is possible "by means of a miracle" in which a gentile *becomes*—physically—a descendant of Abraham. To bolster this case, Wyschogrod points to the talmudic law, codified in the *Shulḥan ʿarukh*, that a mother and son who convert to Judaism are (theoretically) not subject to prohibitions on

> The convert is considered to be like a "new-born child," whose old family ties have been legally and—apparently—physically replaced by new ones.

While frictionless integration is thus probably not possible, a better way forward might be to acknowledge the difference that accompanies the variety of Jewish statuses ....

incest and could marry. This is because the convert is considered to be like a "new-born child," whose old family ties have been legally and—apparently—physically replaced by new ones.

This theory has many remarkable features. One is the extent to which it is reminiscent of sacramental theology, echoing the theory of transubstantiation evoked in the Catholic Church to explain the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Wyschogrod (who was deeply influenced by dialogue with Christian theologians) makes the body of the convert into a sacramental entity, a site of miracles and a testament to "God's power to transform human life." He thus assigns to conversion a highly exalted place. Conversion also plays a useful role in Wyschogrod's apologetics. As noted above, Wyschogrod's theology has been criticized for its highly ethnocentric conception of Jewishness. But through God's power, any person can become Jewish, a fact which Wyschogrod claims furnishes "ultimate refutation of the slander that Judaism is some sort of racism."

Despite all of this, Wyschogrod is clearly, at a certain level, uncomfortable with the idea of conversion. He writes that precisely because conversion is miraculous, it ought to be rare–"miracles," he writes, are not everyday occurrences and "must not be multiplied." He writes that while the Jewish people can absorb a certain number of converts, the latter should not end up constituting a majority. He even goes so far as to advocate for a revival of the late antique phenomenon of "god fearers"—gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel without formally converting. Such an arrangement, he suggests, would satisfy spiritual longings while maintaining clarity about the importance of natural (nonmiraculous) descent from the Patriarchs.

Thus the most remarkable feature of this theology is its dialectical ambivalence. Wyschogrod is pulled this way and that by his attempts to be accountable to the different kinds of Jewish status which the tradition affirms—one rooted in a lineage and fate, and one rooted in personal religious commitment. And what is true for Wyschogrod is true for all of us. Although both models are normative, they are not equally balanced; the former dominates as a matter of law and of communal experience. Jewish law and liturgy are suffused with the language of descent, and the tensions felt by converts are the result of this imbalance. It is interesting to imagine what a Jewish future might look like in which the normativity of descent has been rendered as vestigial as Jewish tribal status is today. But such a Judaism would be a radically different community from the one to which we converts were attracted in the first place. While frictionless integration is thus probably not possible, a better way forward might be to acknowledge the difference that accompanies the variety of Jewish statuses—holding up our particularity, acknowledging both the moments of beauty and those of pain—rather than pretending that we are all, or could ever be, identical.

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i All quotations are from Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996).

My Journey with Judaism

Mallory Deardorff-Dawson

From where I sit now—in my second year as president of Temple Israel, a small Reform congregation in West Lafayette, Indiana—my journey to Judaism seems both extremely unexpected and totally inevitable.

I grew up going to Protestant church with my family nearly every Sunday. I went to Christian summer camp and participated in youth groups. But I often found myself going along with what was expected of me, yet hiding that I didn't 100 percent believe what I was being taught. The more I learned about the history of the creation and compilation of the books of the Bible, the less I believed that these works were written solely by God through divine inspiration nor that they were historical events that occurred as described. However, in the very conservative, Evangelical Christian town I lived in, it was not acceptable to have doubts or ask difficult questions about the contradictions or problematic parts in the Bible. It was expected that "good Christians" have faith in what was taught and that they would not let outside information or influences draw them away from that faith. Even from a young age, I didn't feel comfortable with this "blind faith." Moreover, I was disheartened by the prejudice and bullying I often saw committed at the hands of religious folks, which pushed me further away from organized religion. From the ages of fifteen to thirty, I considered myself an agnostic-atheist—one who does not believe in the existence of any deity, but also believes that it is currently impossible to say for certain that a deity does *not* exist. In high school and college, I was often very vocal about my disdain for religion, which made me a bit of a "black sheep" in my community where there are dozens of churches, where famous evangelist Billy Sunday lived, and where Grace College is located.

However, this viewpoint began to change a few years ago when I began treating my anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Prior to this point, my mind had always been buzzing with thoughts of making mistakes, failure, imposter syndrome, living up to certain expectations, being as successful as possible, etc. My mind was like rush hour in New York City—noisy, chaotic, hurtling from one anxious thought to another at a frantic pace. I began treating my anxiety and OCD and my mind became a calm and serene country road. This quietness allowed other thoughts and feelings to come in.

I returned to the person I was when I was younger, feeling deep awe when thinking about human existence and finding beauty in nature and in connection with others. I felt like I was part of something much larger than myself and my little problems in my daily life. I was part of the Universe and was connected in some mystical way to all other living things.

This feeling was accompanied by a newfound focus on the personal relationships in my life and the special interactions I had every day with family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. This new emphasis on fostering relationships with others came after my dad nearly died in an accident. Seeing how fleeting life is, I rededicated myself to nurturing all of my relationships.

But what do I do with these feelings of connectedness and awe? How do I engage with them on a regular basis? And how do I translate these feelings into actions to enrich my life and the lives of others? The answer, I would soon learn, was Judaism.

My seeking led to Judaism through my discovery via 23andMe that I have a small amount of Ashkenazic Jewish ancestry. Intrigued by this fact, I set out to learn more about Judaism. I knew a little bit about Jewish traditions and culture (mostly from *Seinfeld*), but I wanted to know what Jews actually *believed*. I read book after book about Jewish beliefs, values, and traditions, like

> *My own personal values aligned with* tikkun ʿolam, *tzedakah, and* b'tzelem Elohim.

The author volunteering with Women of Reform Judaism at Goldman Union Camp Institute in April 2023, pictured with Melissa Bellows. Courtesy of the author

sitting shiva, observing Shabbat, and celebrating the various holidays. I couldn't get enough. I was struck by how much it all resonated with me. My own personal values aligned with *tikkun ʿolam*, tzedakah, and *b'tzelem Elohim*. I had always thought that traditional religion was not a good fit for me—it was too stuffy, backwards, judgmental, sexist. But these books showed me a side of religion that felt relevant to me and what I was seeking in life. I especially related to the story of Jacob and Israel meaning to "wrestle" with God. This was not the type of "don't ask questions" religion from my childhood. Judaism encouraged asking questions, struggling with the material, and always learning more.

I began the conversion process and I sped through the books and assignments at a record pace. The date of my *beit din* arrived and I cried as the three rabbis recited the priestly blessing over me. It was truly was one of the most important days of my life.

Through this whole process, I realized that there is a place for me in religion. I learned that it is okay if I don't believe God is an anthropomorphic being that follows my daily life, but instead, is the "Universe," the "Divine," the "Eternal," the "Infinite." I learned that I can ask questions and wrestle with Torah. I learned that Jewish prayers and rituals can provide me with an opportunity in my busy life to stop and contemplate things bigger than myself. What started as a personal journey has become an endeavor to serve others, lessen suffering, and help repair the world.

I have jumped in with both feet in my Jewish community—I am the president of my congregation and I lead Shabbat services when the rabbi is out of town. Although I never would have expected this journey, I find myself relating to the midrash about all Jews (including converts) being present at Mount Sinai. My soul is truly Jewish and I am so glad I realized it.

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Reclaiming a Jewish Soul

Carolyn Ariella Sofia

Like luggage fallen overboard, important things got lost during the great migration to America. In my case, it was a connection to Jewish life. My mother's mother, Carmen Curiel, the daughter of an Orthodox family in Venice, emigrated to the United States during World War I to join an elder sister already here. No Italian Jewish community existed in America, so she married an Italian Catholic man. In turn, my parents baptized me and sent me to Catholic school. I briefly dreamed of becoming a nun. After third grade, however, Carmen secretly began teaching me prayers, her Italian accent caressing the syllables of the Shema. Latin and Hebrew are warring tongues, of course, their scribes arrayed on opposite margins like soldiers across a battlefield. So, like Jerusalem, I grew up a city divided, the flags of Caesar and Solomon staking out the territories of my heart.

While young, I listened to my grandmother's stories and prayers, but never declared myself a Jew to anyone in the family. It was too hard in the face of what I had been taught in church, and impossible while my Catholic father was alive. I do not remember him attending Sunday mass, but do recall him joining friends in the Holy Name Society to spend one night a month at church. What happened there was a mystery. Oddly, the earliest religious memory I have of him occurred in an East Meadow temple on Long Island at the bar mitzvah of Ira, the thirteen-year-old son of one of our neighbors. Our families were close. Ira's mom taught mine how to play mahjong. When it was our turn to host the weekly game, a group of young wives came to our house. The ivory pieces clicked as the women arranged them on wooden racks and made a satisfying thump when placed down in the middle of the table. At the temple that bar mitzvah day my father accepted a yarmulke and prayer shawl as we entered the building. I stared at him in amazement as he put the head covering on his hair and arranged the prayer shawl over his shoulders. He sat on the aisle while Ira, looking grown

The author's bat mitzvah, May 5, 2010, at Temple Beth Emeth in Mt. Sinai, New York, with Rabbi Alan Kay. Photo by Greg Catalano

I was consciously and officially returning to the self I had always been.

up in his first suit, chanted words in a language I could not understand. When men carrying a big scroll approached my father to ask if he would like the honor of carrying the holy Torah, he politely declined, whispering that he was not Jewish. No one seemed offended. Another father quickly stood and shouldered the heavy scroll. What I remember was feeling for a moment that I had belonged to something, then suddenly was locked out.

When I was twenty-four, my father died suddenly. A few years later, so did my grandmother. After their deaths, nothing was holding me back anymore from trying to figure out the mysteries of my grandmother's past.

One of the stellar differences between Christianity and Judaism is the place faith alone takes in the former versus action as a sign of faith in the latter. "We will do, and we will hear," said the Israelites when they accepted the covenant at Sinai. Some commentators say this verse from Exodus means that the Israelites had such faith the people sprang into action before fully understanding what the commandments entailed.

I followed suit. I visited Israel. There, the *pintele Yid* my grandmother had nurtured, that belief that all Jewish souls were present in ancient times when the Torah was given to them on Mt. Sinai, burst into flame. It was time, I thought, to let my hidden Jewish self emerge. Back home, I wrote to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society/Joint Distribution Committee, the World War II organizations that helped displaced Jews find lost family members. Eventually, I located my grandmother's remaining relatives in Venice and even some in Israel. In turn, I received my grandmother's family tree stretching back to 1698 in Venice. I joined a Modern Orthodox congregation in Manhattan and enrolled in their adult education classes.

By Orthodox tradition, Judaism passes through the maternal line, but the synagogue's rabbi informed me how far on the edge I was with respect to a Jewish identity. True, my mother's mother came from a long line of Jews in Venice, but I had not been raised that way. My case was unusual enough that the rabbi felt it necessary to bring it before the Rabbinical Court of America to decide if I was Jewish by maternal connection to my grandmother or was not because of the way I was raised. The legal doubt involved was resolved by having me go to the local ritual bath, the mikveh. At this point, converts are required to recite the traditional blessings in order for the transformative rite to take effect. However, the three senior rabbis (*beit din*) presiding over my mikveh experience told me that I was not required to say those blessings: *I* was not becoming Jewish. Instead, I was consciously and officially returning to the self I had always been. Briefly, I had existed on the borderlands between two cultures, Christian and Jewish, Jewish and Christian, until the magical moment when they had me renounce out loud any spiritual connection to all religions except Judaism.

The path of my return was not easy. It caused friction in the family, some of the criticism harsh and long-lasting. Those who objected considered a person who rejected the triune God a traitor. But, in my view, I had just re-embraced my grandmother's monotheism and liberated my hidden self. For a time, I suffered an identity crisis. When I was with Christians, I heard criticisms of Jews; when I was with Jews, I did not feel comfortable mentioning my father's Christianity. What emboldened me was the acceptance I found by joining a more liberal Reform Jewish community. There is no need to hide my history anymore. I have adopted a healing metaphor and simply think of myself as a single sentence written in two colors.

On Yom Kippur now when I go up to the bimah and begin to read from the Torah, I always think back to that first bar mitzvah attended years ago. I felt so left out then: today I rejoice in my belonging. I was fragmented; now I am whole. It was a long road, but *Hineni*—here I am. Even at the weekly mahjong game.

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The Spiritual and Political Conversion of Ruth Ben David

Motti Inbari

Portrait of Ruth from French ID document. Courtesy of the author

Very few people of the twentieth century had a life story as thrilling as Ruth Ben David/Blau. She was born in northern France in 1920, but as a toddler, her family moved to Paris. Her birth name was Madeleine Lucette Ferraille, the only girl of a struggling family with a sick mother and an abusive father. She grew up Roman Catholic, but as a young woman, Lucette decided to renounce her birth religion and embarked on a spiritual quest first with Seventh-Day Adventists. Later she looked for spiritual fulfillment in the occult and Greek philosophy, and eventually found herself at the heart of the Jewish ultra-Orthodox enclave in Jerusalem. Ruth was a woman of contradictions: a lapsed Catholic who became a Haredi Jew; a free-thinking and promiscuous Parisian who closed herself off in Jerusalem in an environment that oppresses women. How can we explain all these twists and turns?

When World War II broke, Lucette was married to a handsome French soldier and gave him a son, but she wanted more out of life than was within easy reach—more, indeed, than the Vichy regime encouraged. By 1943, she was divorced, with a BA from the University of Toulouse. That year, she started actively resisting the Vichy regime by helping a female Jewish refugee escape deportation and certain death from a concentration camp in Nice. Recruited by the Resistance in early 1944 to become a spy, Lucette made her way into the heart of the local Gestapo by becoming the mistress of a Waffen-SS officer, continuing to spy on the Nazi headquarters just a few months before D-Day. Later, she won recognition from the French government for her bravery during the war.

After the war, Lucette fell into a deep depression and found that neither Christianity nor philosophy could help lift her out of it. "It was Judaism," she later wrote, "which met my sense of universalism, my concept of unity, my need for a convincing theology, and, above all, an increasingly strong inner calling."[i] After deciding to convert, Lucette was looking to meet Jews. In 1950, a visiting Israeli academic to the Sorbonne named Ephraim Harpaz invited her to come to Israel and marry him. She spent a month in Israel and loved it, but she didn't marry Harpaz. Apparently, his parents were very much against him marrying a non-Jew. Instead, she returned to France, where she converted to Judaism under the auspices of a Reform rabbi and adopted the name Ruth Ben David. Later, she met an Orthodox rabbi from Alsace who wanted to marry her. The news that their rabbi was going to marry a convert with a somewhat unclear history upset his community, despite her decision to undergo a second, Orthodox conversion. The couple had taken steps to settle in Israel, but the wedding plans collapsed, and Ruth returned to France disappointed.

In France, she joined the small Hasidic community in Aix-les-Bains. There, she "found, in this environment, brotherhood, equality, and peace of institution of mind, [and] complete observance of the Mitzvot." About ten years later, she would marry Amram Blau, the leader of the anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox Neturei Karta, and next to him, she would become one of the most famous speakers of the anti-Zionist movement within ultra-Orthodox Judaism.

After the war, she was repelled by French nationalism and found in Judaism a counteridentity.

Ruth's journey into Judaism, and later into the most extreme ultra-Orthodox fringe, was a long personal process of religious and political change. It proceeded in stages and included mental distress along with personal, romantic, and professional disappointments. She said that religion became the cure for the hardship she endured. Making profound changes in her lifestyle, religion helped her overcome her depression and disappointments.

As much as it was a journey of one woman amid the backdrop of post–World War II Europe, it is an example of a much larger movement of mostly female converts to Judaism in Germany and France at that same time. After the war, broken Jewish communities handled thousands of conversion applications. Many Christians, horrified by the crimes committed against Jews, requested to join the Jewish faith. Scholar Barbara Steiner identified three types of converts at that time. The first group consisted of the non-Jewish female partners of Jewish men and the children of Jewish fathers. The community saw the integration of these gentile women as a moral obligation, and priority was given to this type of conversion by the few rabbis serving the communities. The second group of converts wished to convert because of their guilt. Solidarity with Jews created a counteridentity for converts. For them, this was a conscious act and a commitment to join the community of victims. The third type of converts decided to join the Jewish ranks because of theological motivations. The fact that Jews had survived mass extermination was taken as a sign of Judaism's superiority as a religion. The persecution of the Jews stood as evidence of the truth of their faith.[ii]

Steiner's analysis fits nicely into the biography of Ruth Ben David. Her conversion started with a marriage proposal she received from an Israeli Jew she met in France, and later, she continued her conversion after she got engaged to a rabbi. Although she never mentioned this explicitly, guilt may have played a role in her motivations, as she repeatedly noted that the condition of Jews during the war touched her heart. Her associations with the Gestapo might have been in the backdrop of her mind when she decided to convert. After the war, she was repelled by French nationalism and found in Judaism a counteridentity.

Her decision to join ultra-Orthodoxy marked a turning point. Ruth would join the defensive struggles of this community against the secular State of Israel and become embedded in one of the most ferocious battles for the soul of the State of Israel, the kidnapping of Yossele Schumacher. In 1960, the seven-year-old Yossele was abducted by his ultra-Orthodox grandfather. The family dispute became a national crisis, a war of principle between secular and Orthodox Jews, as the child was smuggled out of Israel and concealed from his parents for two and half years. Many people were involved in kidnapping and hiding Yossele, but Ruth was in charge of orchestrating the affair, which ended when the Mossad caught her in France and made her confess. The Yossele affair would make a lasting impact on the young Jewish state, the ultra-Orthodox community, and on Ruth's life.

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i Ruth Blau, *The History of Yossele Schumacher* (Brooklyn: Copy Corner, 1993), 63.

ii Barbara Steiner, "'The German Desire to be Jewish': Conversions of Non-Jewish Germans to Judaism after 1945," in *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in Globalized World*, ed. Tudor Parfitt and Netanel Fisher (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 156–66.

What's behind the "L."?

Canan Bolel

a newborn in the home of an
Ashkenazic working-class family
an orphan at the Home for Destitute
and Homeless Boys
a medical missionary in an eastern
Mediterranean port city

Reading The Story of Smyrna Medical Mission *felt as if I had the chance to sit in one of the hidden corners of the waiting room.*

Could all these fragments belong to the life of a single person? If so, how does one accommodate these shifts in one's identity? Where does a past life go when it is replaced by a new one? Does it ever disappear?

"L. Prinski Scott, M.B., C.M., Medical Missionary," was born in the 1860s in Edinburgh as Levi Prinski to a working-class Ashkenazic family. He found himself on the streets after his father's death in a mining accident. Soon after, the Edinburgh Home for Destitute and Homeless Boys gave him a new home and an identity. Perhaps seen as a miraculous story then, he went on to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh.[i]

As efforts to convert Jews became popular in Scottish and English missionary circles in the nineteenth century, medical missionaries put their efforts into bringing bodily relief and spiritual awakening to Jews by bringing them closer to the New Testament. During the Jewish Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland's search for a suitable location for their new mission, a major port city of the Ottoman Empire, Izmir (Smyrna), emerged as an appropriate location, with a Sephardic Jewish population about a third of whom depended on charity to survive in the latter half of the century.[ii]

Young Dr. Scott arrived in Izmir in 1882 and established the Smyrna Medical Mission (SMM) with a dispensary and a mission house. In the sixth year of his service, he founded the Beaconsfield Memorial Hospital between two Jewish quarters in honor of Benjamin Disraeli—former prime minister of the United Kingdom, who was born to a Sephardic Jewish family and became a Christian through his father's conversion—described by Scott as "a distinguished son of Israel," and an ideal for *Izmirli* Jews to look up to.[iii]

What remains of Scott's work in Izmir is *The Story of Smyrna Medical Mission*, a small book published in Edinburgh in 1887. Interestingly still an overlooked source, his account of "specimens of the Jews" along with non-Jewish *Izmirlis* reveals not only his perspective, filled with common Orientalist tropes of his time, but also unveils the longings and insecurities of an orphaned Ashkenazic Jewish convert to Christianity.[iv]

As Scott served this "crowd of suffering people ... a brethren in affliction"[v] with condemnation and pity, his status as a doctor opened doors for him—"Orientals have unlimited faith in a doctor."[vi] The skepticism of Jews under the constant gaze of their religious leaders largely disappeared after learning about Scott's former life. He wrote with a sense of victory, "When, however, they learned that I also was an Israelite and a Hakim [doctor], and that, moreover, I meant to help the poor, gratis, their reserve melted away."[vii]

Reading *The Story of Smyrna Medical Mission* felt as if I had the chance to sit in one of the hidden corners of the waiting room. As the disease stricken waited patiently for their turn while listening to passages from the New Testament, I watched the malnourished children, Jewish women, the chief *dervish* of a neighboring town.... Scott told his readers that a woman claimed to see worms sticking out of each of her child's eyes, and another one claimed that a snake crawled down his throat while he

Levi Prinski at the Home for Destitute and Homeless Boys, 1870. Image via Edinburgh Libraries, https://www.ourtownstories.co.uk/

Beaconsfield Memorial Hospital. Reprinted from L. Prinski Scott, The Story of Smyrna Medical Mission *(Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark, 1887), 2.*

was asleep.[viii] The majority believed that their poor health was caused by evil spirits. Scott strategically placed each of these cases within the text to "prove" the ignorance, stupidity, and unreliability of "his Orientals."

Scott was disgusted by his patients. He took care of wounds that he claimed were never washed, wounds with cheese on top to remove maggots coming out of the flesh, and ears filled with onions now rotten to stop the pain. After sharing these scenes, talking directly to his audience, middle- and upper-class Europeans, sharing a common sense of revulsion, Scott wrote, "Reader, I think you feel it is time to leave the consulting room to get a whiff of fresh air and a look at the blue sky."[ix] Once again, this time on paper, he reinstated the hierarchy between him and the Others, the European doctor and the "savages."

These stories were also shared in Edinburgh's *Home and Foreign Mission Record* for readers to pity and laugh at these faceless yet despicable figures from a faraway land. As much as these stories became a source of entertainment, Scott used these cases to his advantage as he asked for more funds from the central committee for his station, which never provided a high number of baptisms.[x]

Amid this flock of miserables, what differentiated Jews from the rest and made them more worthy of Scott's attention? In the answer lies both the gist of the period's desire to convert Jews and a priceless chance for him to prove his worth.

Describing the Jews of Izmir, Scott wrote, "Here we see the well-marked Jewish features … which twenty centuries of dispersion and suffering have not been able to destroy, but only to intensify by marks of sadness."[xi] As much as Jews of Izmir were pitied, they were valued as "Christ's brethren" and "the sole guardians of revealed truth," and thus the rightful owners of the church's

attention.[xii] Yet, toward the end of the book, Scott's tone changes drastically, becoming more agitated, directly attacking the church's lack of interest in missions to Jews primarily based on the assumption of the inconvertibility of Jews. Feeling targeted and offended, Scott asks, "Were not our Saviour and His disciples Jews?"[xiii]

As a historian, I was captivated by Scott's book; as an *Izmirli*, I was furious at his attitude toward *my people*. The distance between me and Scott—temporal and emotional—seemed insurmountable until I shifted my focus to a particular question: For whom was Scott performing and why?

During his years in Izmir, Scott had many personas, characters, identities: the healer, the preacher, the miracle worker who removed a polyp from a girl's nose—a story that later came to be told as the removal of a fish from the nose of the girl, the intermediary to whom people came for guidance in their disputes. It appears as if he kept all of them, his afterlives, in his right pocket and skillfully selected the one that matched the occasion as he yearned to fit into his desired community, *his people*, while actively distancing himself from the undesirables—the Jews, the Orientals, and the rest.

As I am preparing for my research trip to Edinburgh at the National Library of Scotland to understand what's behind the "L.," I am taking a question he raised in his book with me: "But when the Jew from conviction has left all and followed Christ what is to become of him? What will his future be?"[xiv]

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Dr. Scott as a medical missionary in Izmir. Reprinted from The Church of Scotland Home and Foreign Mission Record, *November 1885, 283.*

i "Levi Prinski's School Days." Our Town Stories {Edinburgh}, 2020, https://www.ourtownstories.co.uk/story/580-levi-prinskis-schooldays.

ii Dina Danon, *The Jews of Ottoman Izmir: A Modern History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 4, citing David Cazès, October 26, 1873, Archives of Alliance Israélite Universelle I C I-7.

iii Scott, *Smyrna*, 26.

iv Ibid., 40.

v Ibid., 19.

vi Ibid., 34.

vii Ibid., 17.

viii Ibid., 34

ix Ibid., 19.

x Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky, *Protestant Missionaries to the Jewish Communities of Istanbul, Salonika and Izmir* (Istanbul: Libra Kitap, 2019), 17.

xi Scott, *Smyrna*, 5-6.

xii Ibid., 5, 44.

xiii Ibid., 42.

xiv Ibid., 48.

Between Coercion and Acceptance: The Conversion of Hidden Children in the Shoah

Alex Scheepens

When in the summer of 1943, twelve-year-old Chaim Dasberg went into hiding with a strict Protestant family in the northern Dutch province of Friesland, it was clear to the Jewish boy that his rescuers had more in mind than just sheltering him. Exposed to the daily pressures of his helpers to have him "believe in Jesus Christ," Chaim quickly understood his rescuers wanted him to embrace their religion. Consequently, he developed an intense feeling of resentment toward his hosting family, likening their conversion attempts to the "brutal assault of rape," the methods of which were "not much different from those of the Spanish Inquisition."[i]

This experience was not shared by the Berlin-born Johanna Rausch. In fact, the Jewish teenager never felt her rescuers tried to convert her to Protestantism. Raised in an Orthodox Jewish family, Johanna was unexpectedly captivated by Bastiaan Ader, a Reformed pastor and Dutch resistance fighter, with whom she lived for thirteen months. It was here, in a small village in the province of Groningen, where she encountered the New Testament and Christian teachings for the first time. Despite the reluctance of her fellow Jews in hiding, she was drawn to the pastor's sermons and hymns. In September 1944, two months after liberation, Johanna made a profound decision that would impact the rest of her life. She was baptized and voluntarily embraced the faith of her former Dutch protector.[ii]

Hiding-related conversion existed in nearly all of Nazi-occupied Europe. In this studio portrait, the young Jewish Krystyna Linden (b. 1942) poses with her baptismal gown. Zolwin, Poland, 1943. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Krystyna Linden

This photograph shows two hidden Jewish children, Beatrix Westheimer (b. 1933) and her cousin Henri Hurwitz (b. 1934), with Catholic priest Adelin Vaes, on the occasion of Beatrix's First Communion. Ottignies, Belgium, May 1943. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Beatrice Muchman

The wartime stories of Chaim and Johanna are just two examples of Jewish children and adolescents hiding in the Netherlands during the Shoah. They also represent two extremes—coerced conversion, on the one hand; wholeheartedly acceptance, on the other. In reality, however, the issue of hiding-related conversion was much more diverse and complex. After all, when Jewish children were hiding with Christian families, they were often required to go to church, attend a Protestant or Catholic school, be familiar with Christian prayers, and adopt new practices, customs, and habits. This was not always done to forcefully convert the child to another religion, but rather to conceal the fact that the child was Jewish.

This is why going into hiding, let alone placing children in the hands of strangers, was not the obvious choice for most Jews when the Nazi deportations of Dutch Jewry began in mid-July 1942. Whereas going underground as a family often allowed parents to stay together with their children and shield the latter from a Christian conversion, entrusting children alone to non-Jewish homes exposed them to the risk of losing their Jewish identity. Because Jewish parents carried historical-emotional baggage as to what conversion meant in terms of their children's Jewishness, baptism played an important role in their decision whether to give away their children or not, especially among Orthodox Jews.

First Communion portrait of Judit Schichtanz (b. 1935). This photo was later used as proof of her Christian identity while she was hiding in Budapest. Budapest, Hungary, May 1943. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Judit Schichtanz

Denise Feiler (b. 1934), a French Jewish girl, takes her First Communion while in hiding. It was not until she gave birth to her first child after the war that she gradually returned to Judaism. Seiches-sur-le-Loir, France, 1943. Museum of Jewish Heritage

Somewhat older children understood the adoption of a Christian lifestyle as a temporary measure. Ten-year-old Marianne Dazzo went to a Catholic school, received lessons in catechism, and was, eventually, baptized. While unclear whether this was against her will, it was, according to herself, merely something that "had to be done."[iii] Similarly, Alex R., who was hiding in the Frisian village of Bolsward, attended church services and learned the New Testament in Sunday school. Yet, he was unable to part from his Jewish identity: "I knew I was Jewish inside … and "could not [become more ardently a member of their religion]."[iv]

Other children remained indifferent to the whole situation. Despite hiding in a monastery, attending the nun's school, studying the Christian Bible, kneeling to a Jesus figure in church, and even speaking some words in Latin—these everyday religious activities did not bother Sonia Ellern or hold any significant meaning to her.[v]

But there were also instances in which adopting the foster family's religious way of life gradually imbued the child with a Christian identity, regardless of whether this was intentional or not. The child perceived this process as a seamless and natural aspect of their upbringing. After all, they were at such an age that they impeccably incorporated these beliefs without knowing any alternative perspectives.

This was the case with the seven-year-old Rita Degen. Even though her foster family did not force their religion upon her, she "felt a Protestant" by all means: "Every night, I obediently said my prayers to the Lord Jesus in Heaven, because I thought there was someone up there

Whereas some viewed conversion as a temporary measure—for others, it was a painstaking experience, accompanied by feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.

looking down on me and if I behaved myself he'd think I was a good little girl and do things to help me."[vi] Likewise, the four-year-old Dientje Kalisky, who received a Catholic upbringing while hiding with a nun for almost three years, knew nothing else except for her "idol"—"my Jesus."[vii]

Sometimes, the adoption of Christianity stemmed from the feeling of separation and abandonment that children experienced. Christianity, with its protective figures of God the Father and Jesus the Son and its rituals and customs, provided children with a sense of family and security, which they so desperately yearned for. Others found a sense of mother-ness in the image of the Holy Virgin Mary.

The contentious issue of conversion did not cease with liberation. Those survivors who experimented with Christian teachings after the war but who eventually returned to Judaism experienced uneasiness, embarrassment, and even guilt discussing the topic. For many, it felt as if they had betrayed their biological parents, who risked their lives during the Holocaust to protect them as Jews. Chaim Dasberg noticed that many children who were "forced to eat the bread of grace" converted to Christianity out of sheer submission, gratitude, and, above all, powerlessness. Some remained Christians for many years afterward—others adopted their new faith forever.

Thus, there existed a wide spectrum of Jewish attitudes to Christian conversion in the Shoah, ranging from all-out resistance to reluctant necessity to unswerving commitment. These behaviors were, of course, influenced by intersecting factors, including level of religiosity, age, gender, geography, and one's surroundings. Whereas some viewed conversion as a temporary measure—for others, it was a painstaking experience, accompanied by feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. Amid these narratives of coercion and acceptance—and everything in between—these formerly hidden children tried to make sense of their past, present, and future.

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i Chaim Dasberg, "Onze zielen hebben we zelf gered," *Hollands Maandblad* (1986).

ii Eyewitness account by Johanna Rausch, Wiener Holocaust Library (WHL), P.III.g./918.

iii Marianne Dazzo, Interview 22283, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, November 3, 1996.

iv Alex R. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-326), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library.

v Memoirs of Sonia Flora Ellern, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O.33/7271.

vi Interview with Rita Degen in Marcel Prins, Andere achterhuizen: verhalen van Joodse onderduikers (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2010).

vii Oral history interview with Dientje Krant Kalisky Adkins, Jewish Heritage Collection, Lowcountry Digital Library, College of Charleston Libraries, April 25, 1997.

Conversion, Then and Now

Aaron J. Hahn Tapper and Anne Tapper

One Friday afternoon, a few months into first grade, with all the enthusiasm that only a six-year-old can bring to a homework assignment, I burst through the front door holding up some papers while saying, "It's for Jewish history, Mom!"

"The whole class is doing it," I belted out. "We have a big map of the world, and school is right in the middle. We're supposed to ask our parents which countries our families came from. And then we'll use yarn to connect each country to our school. It looks like this."

I thrust a picture of the proposed map in front of my mom's face, showing her the different colored lines radiating out from the hub marked "Solomon Schechter Day School."

"This is the color for our families," I said, holding up a few pieces of navy and white tweed fiber.

"What a wonderful idea," my mom said. "Everyone in the family will have such fun helping you. You certainly have some exciting ancestors!"

Over the next few weeks, I learned a lot about my family's roots.

Dad's parents had both been born in Chicago, and dad's grandparents had taken traditional routes to the United States, originating in Latvia and Lithuania. They came to the States to escape pogroms. Most of those who stayed behind were eventually exterminated in World War II death camps.

As for mom, her American bona fides trace back to Dutch Huguenots fleeing the western coast of the Netherlands in the 1630s in search of religious freedom. As staunch Torries, in 1776 or thereabouts, they fled the newish revolutionaries, this time to Canada.

Then there were the Protestant MacDougals of Scotland, who originated from Celtic and Norse lines. Almost wiped out by the Catholic Campbells in 1715, they fled to Ireland. Then, during the late nineteenth century, they dodged the anti-Protestantism of the era, a second time, this time by setting sail for Canada.

As generations passed, Welsh, English, and French people were added to the mix. My mom shared that she exercised the religious freedom her ancestors worked so hard to attain by converting to Judaism before marrying dad.

Six-year-old me was thrilled to have so many different threads for our family that I could put on the map.

A few weeks later, on my school's parents' night, my mom and dad visited my first-grade classroom. But after homing in on our families' navy and white tweed yarn, she was startled to see only one of the many countries from her ancestral line up on the classroom map: Canada.

Failing to catch my teacher's eye, she cautiously went up to her, waiting for a few other parents to finish their conversation.

Six-year-old me was thrilled to have so many different threads for our family that I could put on the map.

Photo by Laurie Hahn Tapper

Once it was her turn, my teacher turned to my mom and said, "Mrs. Tapper, your son is such a good student!" Pointing to the bulletin board with the map, she added, "He worked so hard on this project!" Her voice then dropped to a whisper. "Of course, we were studying *Jewish* history. You understand."

Mom took a moment and then responded in turn. "I don't believe that I do. The other cultures that impacted Jewish experiences—these people who are also part of the Jewish American story—they're not part of *Jewish* history?"

Apparently, my teacher was at a loss for words.

Mom continued. "The men and women who have risen above the hurdles thrown at them and embraced a Jewish identity, they're not part of *Jewish* history?"

My teacher decided to take a different tactic. "Let me explain it to you this way, Mrs. Tapper. There is a very special perspective that *we*—based on *our* experience—that an outsi… well, someone who wasn't raised in the community might not understand it. Until you've had your heritage denied by the dominant culture, you cannot really understand what I mean."

"I haven't experienced that tonight?" my mom rhetorically asked, before she walked away briskly.

Now, some forty-five years later—a decade older than my mom was that night—I continue to think about this story.

Having non-Jewish grandparents was unique in my day school community. But even among those with this background, our school environment taught us that we were not supposed to readily discuss such things.

More than any other time in my life, one's "position on Israel" seems to have yet again taken on even greater importance than previously, all too often determining whether or not one is kosher.

And today? Even though thousands upon thousands of non-Jews have joined the Jewish community since that time—whether by converting to Judaism or engaging in Jewish life in myriad other ways *as non-Jews*—I know that the world view my teacher displayed is not something entirely of the past.

No doubt there have been positive changes in some Jewish spaces toward greater inclusion. Many Jews have made monumental strides in embracing those who were once marginalized or ignored.

Yet, based on my experiences with contemporary Jewish institutions, I'd be shocked if such an episode didn't repeat itself today.

Perhaps more troubling, I wonder aloud if the line separating insider and outsider nowadays isn't sometimes something else altogether: not a border between whether or not one was born into the Jewish community but rather whether or not one "supports Israel."

The insider/outsider boundary today also reflects if one is a "real" Jew in terms of their ideology, or, in this case, their expression of Jewish nationalism.

Of course, the binary of "Pro-Israel/Anti-Israel" and "Zionist/Anti-Zionist" (crude terms in their own right) isn't a twenty-first-century idea. In 1979, for example, renowned Jewish American rabbi and avowed Zionist Arthur Hertzberg wrote, "One can no longer be excommunicated in Modern [Jewish] America for not believing in God, for living totally outside the tradition, or even for marrying out. Instead, a new heresy has now emerged to mark the boundaries of legitimate Jewish identity, the heresy of opposition to Israel and Zionism."

More than any other time in my life, one's "position on Israel" seems to have yet again taken on even greater importance than previously, all too often determining whether or not one is *kosher*.

Conversion, of course, is most often used in Jewish contexts in relation to converting to Judaism, often an intense process leading to someone identifying as Jewish anew.

Sadly, despite the rich and nuanced multiple layers of Jewish heterogeneity—across time and place—Jewish Americans today, largely those of older generations (including my own), commonly make pledging oneself to the State of Israel a final ritual addition to the conversion process, a supplementary litmus test for Jews who were born into the community or chose to join later on or even for those non-Jews actively part of the Jewish community. This decades-long ideological checkpoint continues to sow seeds of xenophobia within this centuries-old tiny community, a dangerous addendum to Rabbi Shammai's hitting away the potential convert with a yardstick.

Something outsiders wouldn't understand? I'm not so sure.

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Rountable
Conversion and the Holocaust

Roundtable Editor:
Jason Schulman

Contributors:
Ion Popa, Yaakov Ariel,
Kiril Feferman, Daniela R. P. Weiner,
Carolyn Sanzenbacher,
Angela Kuttner Botelho

Introduction
Jason Schulman

During moments of extreme social pressure and antisemitism throughout history, some Jews have, either strategically or under duress, converted to Christianity. To understand one such moment, for this roundtable, we asked six scholars to reflect on Holocaust-era conversions. As several of the participants note, the Nazi obsession with race complicated Jews' religious conversion, since racial Jewishness trumped newfound Christianity. In *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen traces this German insistence on viewing converts as still fundamentally Jews to the late nineteenth century, since, he explains, "Germans came to see conversion to Christianity as a deceptive Jewish maneuver, a sham."[i] Looking at Holocaust-era conversions opens up an interesting perspective through which to view the varied experiences and choices of converts, as well as those who accepted, or refused to accept, them.

i Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 68.

Defining Jewish Converts to Christianity before and during the Holocaust
Ion Popa

Who is a Jewish convert? And who defines who a convert is? Before and during the Holocaust, the perpetrators often did that, and definitions varied by location and time. In 1930s Germany, although antisemitic policies were claimed to be based on the concept of race, to determine who was Jewish, half-Jewish, or non-Jewish, authorities had to go back to religious records. In essence, Nazi legislation considered Jews who converted more than two generations earlier to be fully Christian Germans, but those baptized later were still categorized as Jewish (converts). The use of these cut-off periods in the definition of Jewish converts (or, as it appears often in wartime documents, "non-Aryan Christians") was even more pronounced in Romania, where confusing conversion legislation changed several times. Under some laws, those baptized before 1928 were seen as fully Christian Romanians; under others, the cut-off period was moved to August 1940, when policies similar to the Nuremberg Laws were introduced in the country. After the March 1941 ban of conversions, there was yet another categorization, with Jews baptized after that date being considered converts, while those baptized before categorized as Christian Romanians. (For this reason—and because Jewish converts chose to declare their baptism depending on geography, geopolitics, diplomacy, or time frame of various policies—wartime statistics and censuses on conversions must be treated with caution.)

In his seminal 2013 article on Holocaust "conversions and de-conversions," Yaakov Ariel defined converts as "those persons, in Nazi occupied Europe, who, in preparation for, or during, or as a consequence of the Nazi pursuit, its upheavals, displacements and danger, chose to adopt Christianity, as a shelter, a mask, or a spiritual haven, temporarily or permanently."[i] In a 2019 piece, I added two more categories of "Jewish converts": first, people baptized before the Nazi ascension to power, but who still identified, out of choice or due to legislation, as Jews after baptism, and second, those, mostly children, who

did not actively choose to change religions, but followed their parents' or guardians' initiative.[ii] However, my and Ariel's definitions remain incomplete and show the need for much clearer and wider exploration of this topic.

Any examination of interwar and wartime Jews' conversions to Christianity must start with a better understanding of the secularized context. In the twentieth century, baptisms were significantly different from those of previous periods. In medieval and early modern times, conversion meant an irrefutable change of religion, which also triggered a decisive shift in ethnic, national, and social belonging. In the years leading up to the Holocaust, that was no longer the case, as religion and civil citizenship were separated and religious affiliation was increasingly formal. In such a context, a change of religion was not as dramatic as before.

Conversions during the Holocaust were even more drastically different. Most (adult) Jews baptized during the Shoah saw this as a form of survival and temporary resistance. A Jew converting from 1939 to 1945 knew that, when the situation changed, he could revert to his religious identity. Although there are no clear statistics, it is safe to estimate that the majority of those baptized during World War II either returned to Judaism immediately after the war or remained secular. In most cases there was no need for any formal return; people continued to consider themselves Jewish and belonging to Judaism. The situation of Jewish children was different; they likely interpreted conversion less in terms of survival and temporality, and each individual complex experience depended on aspects such as religious context, location, gender, and the influence of adults around them. In postwar testimonies we see that many converts, especially children, were, even decades later, overwhelmed by a sense of shame.[iii]

Who is a Jewish convert, then? In our definitions and categorizations, we need to explore more closely the many nuances of conversion. We must recognize that "Jewish convert" is a term that encapsulates a variety of experiences. Someone baptized at the end of the nineteenth century and who identified for many decades as Christian had a very different experience from someone who converted just to escape persecution during the Holocaust. Someone baptized in the 1920s for marriage or career advancement, but who remained largely secular, experienced conversion differently from a child who was hidden in a religious institution and forced directly or indirectly to be baptized.

In addition, experiences of conversion must be understood in light of churches' and states' policies on conversion, many of which were bypassed during the Holocaust. In Romania, for example, baptism was considered final when it was registered with city hall authorities; yet, from March 1941, such registration was not possible anymore. Should Jews who baptized after that date be considered converts? Depending on timing, some did catechization, were baptised, but never received a certificate of baptism, while others received such certificates in advance of their baptism. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must keep in mind the key role of conversion as a means of survival and the context of secularism in any examination of this topic.

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i Yaakov Ariel, "From Faith to Faith: Conversions and De-Conversions during the Holocaust," *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 12 (2013): 37.

ii Ion Popa, "Experiences of Jews Who Converted to Christianity before and during the Holocaust: An Overview of Testimonies in the Fortunoff Video Archive," *S:I.M.O.N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 7, no. 1 (2020): 75–86.

iii See, for example, the testimony of Susan M. in the Fortunoff Video Archive of Holocaust Testimonies (HVT-537), or the testimony of Nadia R. (HVT-3132).

Conversion and Identity during and after the Holocaust

Yaakov Ariel

Many Jews turned to Christianity during the Holocaust and in its immediate aftermath. The experiences of Jews who became Christians varied considerably, depending on the cultural, communal, and confessional environments in which they found refuge, as well as on the nature of their interactions with individual Christians, who helped them hide or disguise as Christians, and at times facilitated their conversion to Christianity. The age, gender, and personal inclinations of the converts also played important roles.

Jews hiding from the Nazis had to pose as committed Christians if they wanted to blend in as "non-Jews." Children and young adults were more adaptable and ready to adopt, learn, and acquire new customs, cultures, and faiths. For the most part, they were separated from their parents and the cultural group into which they were born, acquiring what writer Andrew Solomon called "horizontal identity," one that separated them from their parents and allowed many of them greater freedom to explore and make choices on their own.[i] Christianity offered more than a means of survival for children and youth. For the most part, it could be practiced openly and offered an emotional haven and a means of obtaining spiritual comfort, as well as an alternative community and a set of role models who were available and operating.

Conversions do not occur in a vacuum, divorced of the people and faith systems the convert encounters, and they undoubtedly entail meetings with agents of the new faith, be it parent figures or peers. Conversions to Christianity during the Holocaust, almost needless to say, occurred in Christian settings, both socially and spiritually. When rescuers of Jews were not committed Christians, conversions would rarely take place. If the individuals hiding Jews were, for example, socialists or communists, or underworld figures, one would rarely hear about conversions. Those hiding with Christian hosts were susceptible to Christian atmosphere spiritually and culturally. Rescuers—and their convictions and lives—were often the only ones to whom hiding Jews could relate in a time of need, their former worlds shattered. That many of the people who were willing to hide Jews were committed Christians affected rescued Jews. Conversion meant, among other things, paying the rescuers the highest compliment, as role models and exemplary persons, as well as creating a life-long bond with them.

For many Jews in hiding, the process of conversion was gradual, adopting Christianity as a disguise and then finding merit and solace in its rites, spirituality, symbols, and texts. Internalizing Christianity, its tenets of faith and rites, helped Jews appear more convincing as Christians, as well as come to terms with the culture and community around them. It worked to synchronize their feelings and convictions with their newly created persona.

For some Jews who converted to Christianity, the journey ended. Their settling down as Christians matches religion scholar Thomas Tweed's paradigm of "crossing and dwelling."[ii] For many other converts, however, the journey did not end there. For some, remaining Christian was a matter of survival even after the end of the war. It was when such converts gradually established contacts with other Jews, or were approached by emissaries of Jewish groups, that many of them realized that they could now choose to become Jews. Some became more interested when they learned about the various opportunities that Jewish agencies offered, such as aiding with immigration to Western countries. This was particularly evident in Jewish organized efforts to retrieve children who had found refuge in Christian homes or institutions, and, for the most part, assumed, during the war years, strong Christian identities. Jewish groups and emissaries of all affiliations looked upon the converts as a human reservoir that could help fill

the dwindled Jewish ranks with manpower and energy. At this stage, the converts' road to Judaism entailed something of a second, often gradual, conversion, including a process of deconversion, parting of ways from older communities and faiths, and embracing new environments, affiliations, and ideologies.

Reunion with family members was not always a smooth experience for Jews who had accepted Christianity. "I came home, but I was homesick," reminisced one child returning to live with Jewish family members after the war.[iii] Rites, customs, and imagery did not disappear overnight and new identification as Jews could not eradicate Christian sensitivities and customs. Some converts retracted their return to Judaism and later started their religious journey again. At times Holocaust-era converts developed complex identities. A few of them joined congregations of Hebrew Christians, advocating a Protestant evangelical faith coupled with Jewish symbols, customs, and Jewish self-identification. Others established Catholic Hebrew congregations.

The saga of Jews who became Christians during the Holocaust involved formations of, weaving together, and reconfigurations of identities. While not always smoothly or consciously, tens of thousands of individuals had to muster initiative, ingenuity, and skill building in assuming new identities, re-inventing and reconfiguring themselves constantly. Those successes in assuming and choosing identities discredit, in an ironic, and at the same time tragic, manner the claims of ultranationalist and racist ideologues, whose theories justified the hostile policies that forced Jews to adopt new identities during that period. Contrary to notions about identity embodied in "land and blood," ethnic and religious identities were evidently not carved in stone. In other words, converted Jews turned into the people Nazis claimed they could never become. And those identities were not final. Although converts often internalized their new Christian identities and faiths, many of them have later embarked on new journeys, reconstructing their identities anew and reinventing themselves again. Some ended up retaining elements of both traditions, struggled to find a niche somewhere in between the two communities, or both. In doing so, they challenged not only their former pursuers, but their coreligionists, in both camps, as well. Their choices have shown the borders between religious communities, ethnic loyalties, and cultural differences to be more fluid, flexible, and open to individual adaptations and self-selections than had often been assumed. While at first glance conversions in the wake of the Holocaust seem like a chapter in repression, and while they were connected to persecutions and mass killings, they are also testimonies to human ingenuity, adaptability, and ability to recreate and plant themselves successfully, albeit not without pain, in new, and often hostile, communal and spiritual territories.

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i Andrew Solomon, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (New York: Scribner, 2013).

ii Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

iii Diane L. Wolf, *Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden Children and Postwar Families in Holland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 163.

Jewish Conversion in the Occupied Soviet Territories during the Holocaust

Kiril Feferman

Introduction

During the Holocaust, Jewish conversion to Christianity served as a complex survival tactic, with the Soviet context adding a unique dimension to this historical experience. Here I delve into the distinct factors that shaped Jewish conversions in the occupied Soviet territories.[i] Despite being a relatively rare phenomenon, these cases are remarkable in shedding light on the multifaceted conversion considerations and the ensuing survival strategies employed by some Jews. This analysis contrasts the varying degrees of anti-Jewish policies between Nazi and Romanian regimes.

The Unique Soviet Landscape

Jewish conversions in the occupied Soviet Union during the Holocaust were shaped by the prewar Soviet context. Prior to the war, the Soviet regime's sweeping antireligious policies, characterized by state-sanctioned persecution of clergy and believers, had alienated a significant portion of the population. Consequently, during the occupation, many within the local populace, particularly in areas with strong religious traditions, interpreted the German declarations of "freedom of religion" not as mere propaganda but as a welcome return to normalcy. This welcome among specific segments of the local population, particularly religious leaders, undoubtedly influenced Jewish conversion experiences during the occupation.

Moreover, decades of Soviet rule in the "core" Soviet territories (i.e., not areas annexed by the Soviets after the onset of the Second World War) in the interwar period significantly molded a distinct Soviet Jewish identity, wherein religion played a diminished role. Consequently, when faced with a conversion dilemma, Soviet Jews often did not experience the same level of internal conflict as their more traditional counterparts from recently annexed areas. For the latter group, the decision to convert involved a complex negotiation of religious beliefs, cultural heritage, and the desperate need for survival.

Finally, the role of the Christian churches in the Soviet territories during the Holocaust was unique. Previously suppressed by the Soviet regime, the churches found themselves in a complex position during the Nazi occupation. While a few clergy members actively aided conversions, many held grievances against the Soviet regime's antireligious policies, leading to a degree of accommodation toward the German regime. Others, however, remained wary of Nazi intentions toward religion in the long term. The churches' roles in conversions were thus deeply situational, influenced by individual clergy members' perspectives on both Jews and Communism in general and the specific individuals seeking their help.

German- and Romanian-Controlled Territories

The triggers behind Jewish conversions during this period were intrinsically linked with the survival instinct in an overwhelmingly hostile environment. The pervasive violence, driven by Nazi and collaborating forces' antisemitism, compelled Jews to seek any avenue for survival, with conversion to Christianity emerging as a pragmatic, albeit unrecognized, option by German authorities. Interestingly, in some local contexts, converted Jews encountered somewhat lenient attitudes from local authorities, offering a glimmer of hope amid widespread despair.

Romanian-controlled territories presented a contrasting scenario to the German-occupied regions in their approach to Jewish conversion. Unlike the Germans, who systematically pursued the annihilation of Jews irrespective of their religious affiliation, Romanian authorities exhibited a more complex and, at times, contradictory stance toward Jewish converts. Romanian military and administrative officials operating in Transnistria, a region in south Ukraine under

Romanian occupation, did not consistently adhere to a single policy regarding Jewish conversion. This inconsistency could provide Jews with a sliver of hope for survival that was largely absent in areas under German control.

Romanian policies toward Jews were influenced by a variety of factors, including local administrative autonomy, economic considerations, and the interplay between state and ecclesiastical antisemitism in Romania itself, which did not always align perfectly with Nazi racial ideologies. While the Romanian government did participate in the persecution and mass murder of Jews, there were instances where conversion to Christianity was temporarily accepted as a legitimate means of escape from persecution.

The Romanian approach also had significant implications for the Jews, even in the German-held occupied Soviet territories, as some, hearing rumors about survival in the Romanian-held zone through conversion, attempted to flee there. The possibility of conversion as a means of survival, though fraught with moral and spiritual dilemmas, provided a unique escape route for some Jews that was unavailable under German rule. This further complicated the dynamics of Jewish survival strategies during the Holocaust and highlighted the divergent paths of Nazi and Romanian occupation policies. The Romanian case underscores the critical importance of local conditions and the existence of antisemitic ideologies distinct from the Nazi racial paradigm, which shaped Jewish experiences with conversion during the Holocaust.

Conclusion

The study of Jewish conversion during the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet territories reveals the profound impact of the Soviet context, which arguably set these areas apart from the other regions dominated by Nazi Germany and its allies during the Holocaust. This context, even when the Soviet regime was no longer present in the occupied areas, profoundly influenced local conditions and survival strategies. The Soviet regime's prewar antireligious policies had already diminished the role of religion in the lives of many Soviet Jews, making the internal conflict over conversion less pronounced for them compared to their more traditional counterparts from recently annexed areas. Simultaneously, the generally positive reception of the German policies of religious freedom by the local population and Christian churches diminished their willingness to assist Jews seeking conversion.

Noteworthy were also the conspicuous differences in ideological and practical approaches toward conversion between Nazi Germany and Romania. While Nazi Germany's genocidal policies left virtually no room for escape through conversion, Romania's inconsistent but sometimes lenient approach provided a narrow but critical avenue for some Jews to evade death.

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i On the Jewish religious experience in the occupied Soviet areas, see Kiril Feferman, "Save Your Souls: Jewish Conversion & Survival in the Occupied Soviet Territories during the Holocaust," *Modern Judaism* 39, no. 2 (May 2019): 184-204; on the non-Jewish one, see Johannes Due Enstad, "Prayers and Patriotism in Nazi-Occupied Russia: The Pskov Orthodox Mission and Religious Revival, 1941-1944," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 94, no. 3 (2016): 468-496.

Finding Converts in the Pope Pius XII–Era Church Archives

Daniela R. P. Weiner

In December 1938, a man named Erico wrote to a Catholic priest, "It's terrible. I have never been Jewish, from the first elementary school class I received the doctrine of our Sacred Faith, but being from that unhappy lineage, they force me to be theirs." The convert continued, "If today in Italy there occurs a persecution of Christians as in Germany, I will be the first that presents himself as a convinced Catholic and if I need to suffer it a hundred times. But declaring myself a Jew, no, I cannot!" Erico, educated as a Catholic since his childhood, had been categorized as "Jewish" by the 1938 Italian racial laws.[i]

Erico was born in Austria but relocated to Italy around 1920. He was married to a non-Jewish woman, who was, in Erico's words, "of pure arian [sic] descent." Since Erico was considered a "foreign Jew" under the Italian racial laws, he was required to emigrate. In the summer of 1938, the Italian Fascist government decreed that "foreign Jews" could not reside in Italy. "Foreign Jews" could only be temporarily in the country for "sojourn" or "transit" and eventually in 1939 and 1940, this option of a "sojourn" or "transit" visa was taken away from Jews of German, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovakian national origin (as well as "stateless" persons). As a result of this summer 1938 decree, Jews who had arrived in Italy after January 1, 1919, with a few exceptions, were notified that they would be expelled from the country as of March 12, 1939.[ii] But it was very difficult to receive a permit to emigrate. As Erico wrote in an English-language note requesting assistance emigrating, "If I am not able to leave the country within two months my destiny will be a concentration camp, if not worse."[iii]

Erico pleaded with church officials for assistance to emigrate to a "Catholic country and to be sheltered in a Jesuit college" so that his family could remain in Italy in peace. In a December 1938 letter, he proclaimed, "I will do any work, secretary, but also the gardener's assistant etc. etc., I do not ask anything, only daily bread and to be considered Catholic again."[iv]

In the end, it appears that Erico was not required to leave Italy. Instead, based on documentation that I found, it seems that in late 1939, Erico ended up getting a job in the office of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and in January 1940, received permission to stay in Italy.[v] It's unclear what happened to Erico after 1940, as I have not yet been able to locate further documentation. However, Erico's story gestures to the fact that converted Jews may have had different experiences of Italian Fascism from individuals who remained religiously Jewish during the period of legalized racial persecution.

I first discovered Erico's story in the papers of Jesuit historian and priest Pietro Tacchi Venturi in the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI) archives in Rome and then further traced Erico's story through in the archives of the Secretariat of the State, a department within the Vatican bureaucracy. I plan to eventually include Erico's story and the stories of other individuals whom I found in these archives in a future book project focused on the experiences of Nazi/Fascist persecution and the Holocaust of converts from Judaism to Catholicism. The highly anticipated March 2020 opening of the Pope Pius XII–era church archives provides a rich transnational source base with which to explore the Holocaust-era experiences of Jewish individuals, who although racially classified as Jewish by Nazi/Fascist regimes, were practicing

Catholics. Conversion during the Holocaust and the experiences of converts have been largely ignored by most scholars of the Holocaust or modern Jewish history, mostly because the Nazis defined "Jewishness" as a racial rather than a religious category. Therefore, most scholars have assumed that individuals who converted from Judaism to Christianity still had very similar Holocaust-era experiences to individuals who remained religiously Jewish.

My new project–which is in its early stages–interrogates that assumption. Scholars already know that there were a small number of visas to Brazil set aside for those who were German converts from Judaism to Christianity, although not all these visas were allocated.[vi] And in the case of Erico, a converted identity could sometimes lead to help from Christian ecclesiastical authorities. What is unclear at this point is if these cited instances were outliers or if, in general, different opportunities for survival existed for individuals who had chosen to leave religious Judaism behind. I anticipate that this may prove to be a fruitful area of future research.

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i *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu* (ARSI), Fondo Tacchi Venturi, Series "Affari," b. 75, fasc. 2188, f. 1. All translations of archival documents are my own.

ii Tacchi Venturi Affari b. 75, fasc. 2188, f. 5 (document is in English); Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 130–41.

iii Tacchi Venturi Affari b. 75, fasc. 2188, f. 5.

iv Tacchi Venturi Affari b. 75, fasc. 2188, f. 1-2.

v Vatican City, Historical Archive of the Secretariat of State – Section for Relations with States and International Organizations (ASRS), Collection *Congregazione degli Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari* (AA.EE.SS.), Pius XII, Part I, Series "Ebrei," Pos. 141, ff. 91a r-v, 93 r.

vi Jeffrey Lesser, *Welcoming the Undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 146–47; Avraham Milgram and Naftali Greenwood, "The Jews of Europe from the Perspective of the Brazilian Foreign Service, 1933–1941," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, no. 1 (1995): 109.

The Languages of Classification and Conversion

Carolyn Sanzenbacher

Conversion and baptism are issues in Holocaust studies by virtue of their centrality to the Nazi Aryan laws of the 1930s, which became the model for all disenfranchisements of Jews in Nazi Europe. The 1933 laws defined as "non-Aryan" anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent. To further classify and legislate what was openly framed as a "Jewish problem," non-Aryans were defined in the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 according to a complexly constructed definition of inherited "Jewishness" based on the religion of one's forebears. Any Jew or Christian with at least one Jewish grandparent was classified as a "Jew" or first or second degree Mischling. Proof of religious descent through birth and baptismal documents was the basis on which the legally defining decisions were made.

The churches were pulled into this classification system by way of their roles as keepers of records, conveyors of sacraments, and dispensers of baptismal certificates. While Nazi and subsequent Nazi-inspired laws made clear that baptism after specified dates would not affect one's classification, numbers of Jews across Europe sought conversion as an uncertain means of escaping the dangers of being legally cataloged as "Jews." Church responses to the defining legislation, as well as clerical willingness or refusal to perform baptisms or forge baptismal certificates for Jews, have therefore remained relevant to all areas of Holocaust research.

On a parallel plane, scholars have examined the complexities and variations of conversion and baptismal language used in Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox debates about the application of the Aryan laws to Christians of Jewish descent. As reflected in Protestant debates in 1933 Germany and elsewhere in Europe as anti-Jewish laws were enacted, that included the invocation of the Adversus Judaeos tradition of viewing the Jews as a deicidal people. As one example, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called on the "curse" of Jewish suffering to argue for noninterference of the church in problems of the state, as the Aryan laws applied to Jews, and noninterference of the state in the baptismal sacrament of the church, which irrevocably reversed the penalty of suffering for Christians of Jewish descent.[i]

Scholars are now also analyzing the use of language in the broader conversionary discourse—the range of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, concepts, and arguments used within Christianity to discuss conversion of Jews—and what that meant in terms of Christian responses to the rapidly unfolding events in Nazi Europe. In most, if not all, of these studies, scholars are faced with the task of prying apart and assessing the complexly layered ways in which the traditional claims of supersessionism (that Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism) were woven together with modern sociopolitical constructs and theological claims of Christian duty and responsibility.

What is perhaps most challenging is that many of the discourses purporting to advance a Christian world view simultaneously employed words, ideas, and concepts common to Nazi antisemitic language, theory, and propaganda. To say this another way, in the same period in which Jews were being publicly defined and circumscribed as a world problem in Nazi terms, pejoratively connoted terms such as "Jewish influence," "Jewishness," "Judaization," "world Jewry," "eternal Jew," and "Bolshevik Jews" were being disseminated in conversionary discourse that was also rooted in the belief that a universal Jewish problem existed.

Indeed, as a case in point from my own research, there was enough international Protestant agreement about a universal Jewish problem by the mid-interwar period to mandate the creation of a central lobby for expansion of global evangelization as the only long-term solution. While other aims and motives were involved, not least of which was metaphysical belief in the "divine directive" to

bring Jews to their spiritual destiny in Christianity, it was the fusing of such traditional beliefs to the modern belief in a universal Jewish problem that generated the mandate for an organization to argue that Jewish conversion was a societal need.

By the eve of Hitler's rise, the International Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews was a constituted body, a program of Jewish evangelization recognized in thirty-six countries, and the self-christened agent for educating Protestant churches on the "right" Christian attitude toward Jews, the Jewish problem, and antisemitism. Beginning with the claim that a Jewish problem would not have emerged if the church had not failed historically to convert world Jewry, arguments designed to rally evangelizing forces were widely disseminated in Continental Europe, Britain, and North America in the years immediately before, during, and after the Holocaust.

The overall discourse was an ambivalent mix of theological and theoretical validation for global expansion of Jewish missions, defense of Christendom against perceived Jewish ingressions, and defense of Jews against the Nazi racial antisemitism that violated Christianity's universality. In this entwined conflation of positive and negative attitudes, wherein churches were urged to find, love, and evangelize the Jews of their regions, pejorative conceptions such as "Jewish influence," "Jewish racial consciousness," and Jewish movements toward Zionism, nationalism, and Bolshevism were repeatedly framed as "entrenchment of Jewry in opposition to Christianity."[ii]

Both before and after enactment of the Nuremberg Laws and a corresponding increase in Nazi propaganda about the threat of "Judaization," a range of such arguments targeted with frequency a "renaissance of Jewishness" rooted in racial and national aspirations, going so far as to avow that "Jewry will Judaize the world" if Christianity does not "Christianize Jewry."[iii] International church audiences were ambivalently urged to combat racial antisemitism and pray for suffering Jews, on the one hand, and warned about the dangers of an atheistic, nationalistic and racially conscious modern Jewry, on the other.

Here, and in other such cases of complexly woven discourse, where every claim about a Jewish threat to Christianity or Christendom carried the potential of legitimizing Nazi claims about a Jewish world threat, the question is not whether the goal of Jewish conversion was reached, but, rather, at what expense to Jews conversion was pursued. The deeper issue is whether the conversionary language and arguments of a claimed moral authority caused harm to Jews by providing legitimacy, offsetting compassion, fueling antisemitism, or in other ways contributing to passive acceptance of the suppressing aims and goals of Nazi anti-Jewish policies.

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i Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures, and Notes 1928–1936*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 222–227.

ii Carolyn Sanzenbacher, *Tracking the Jews: Ecumenical Protestants, Conversion, and the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), 98, 275.

iii Ibid., 80–81, 276.

Un-Converting: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Jewish Self

Angela Kuttner Botelho

I was born in 1942, the first Kuttner child born in the United States. My older siblings were born in Rome. Eventually we would be nine children. I see my father, a scholar, buried in his study, cigarettes and wine at hand. My mother, warm, emotive, single-handedly managed her large household with a characteristic touch of iron. My mother often recounted to us our origin story. This is how I remember it:

> Here is how we escaped the Nazis, my mother would begin. We lived in Rome in an apartment, your grandparents nearby. It was 1940. Nazis and Fascists were everywhere. Your father had gone into hiding, making his way to Portugal. He had a job offer in America, and was waiting for us. I was supposed to join him in Lisbon, but was very pregnant with your sister and could not travel. I had the two little boys with me. By the time she was born and I was able to travel, it had become impossible to get exit papers.
>
> We, your grandparents, your father and I, were all very worried. I decided to kill the children if they came to arrest us. I had bought poison pills for this purpose. Or perhaps I would send them away into the countryside with our Italian maid. I had already been called in for questioning and had no travel papers.
>
> There was a glamorous Italian woman who lived in our building. Everyone despised her because she often was seen with high-ranking Fascist officials. Almost a prostitute, people thought. I sort of liked her though; she was high-spirited and funny and had beautiful clothes. We were always cordial to one another. One day, soon after your sister was born, she saw me crying. What's wrong, she asked. I am a Jew. I'm afraid we'll all be killed, my children with me. I have no papers and cannot leave. She laughed, rather affectionately, almost teasingly. Oh, is that your problem. Don't worry, I can get your papers for you easily from one of my friends. And so she did.

Beyond the terror of the story—and the unimaginable idea that my mother would kill her children, us, me—was the statement that rang out so sharply. "I am a Jew." What did that mean? I knew my mother was Catholic, as was my father.[i] We went to church every Sunday.

Our family history, then, officially that of a prolific American Catholic family, my father a leading scholar of medieval canon law, had a subtext of something quite different, something hidden, dangerous, indeed, life-threatening, and immensely powerful. We were Jews. Whatever that meant.

**

The above is a modified version of the opening words of my 2021 book, *German Jews and the Persistence of Jewish Identity in Conversion: Writing the Jewish Self*.[ii] In it, I explore the fraught aftermath of the German Jewish conversionary experience through the medium of one family, my own, as it grapples with its fateful Jewish origins in a postexilic, post-Holocaust era. What follows draws from the book's observations and conclusions.

The conversion story I tell is largely unfamiliar to an American Jewish audience, though not to the German Jewish community from which I descend, marked by a so-called *Taufepidemie* (baptism epidemic) arising alongside the German Jewish encounter with modernity, initiated by Moses Mendelssohn's Enlightenment project.[iii] (Famously, four of his six children converted.)

My own research turns on my family, my deceased parents' archival traces, and the living voices, in many a videotaped interview, of their nine children and eighteen grandchildren.

My interview question is, unfailingly: "What is your relationship to your Jewish heritage?" Their responses were both confounding and enlightening. Tellingly, only *one* of us has remained Catholic. The others spoke passionately of fractured, uncertain identities, changing over time, emerging from an ostensibly Christianized context to embody a complex, hybrid, unmistakably Jewish self, however tenuously understood, frequently outside of any normative practice or affiliation. Uniformly emphasized was the decisive impact of my mother's obsessively repeated message. Remember! Remember our origins! Honor our mythic, miraculous flight from oppression, certain death, to freedom! *Zakhor*.

My own long, uncertain journey from baptism through Catholic schools and beyond eventually resolved in an active synagogue involvement, AJS presentations, a published book. And yet, and yet…. At annual festival dinners, Rosh Hashanah, the Passover seder, everyone awash in familiar rituals and foods—it is then that I feel most keenly my Otherness, for in truth my holiday memories go back to many a childhood Christmas, its soft candlelight, the sharp scent of pine, carols lustily sung, all gone. And so I find myself once again outside the magic Jewish circle I so longed to enter, the promise of *teshuvah*. For my family of Jews are always, fatally, *other* Jews, cast adrift by decisions made generations earlier, on a distant continent, in a bygone era.

And yet, among our diverse, bewildering array of chosen options, what emerged, I found, was an admittedly inchoate tribal identity, manifested in the uniformly serious grappling with the question at hand and an acknowledgment of how critically it has framed each of our lives. In sum, what we recovered was not, largely, a traditional Jewish practice or rhythm, but rather, as literary scholar Dan Miron puts it, Judaism as "a perception of reality through … the experience of being a 'Jew' in the world."[iv]

Though the Holocaust and its fateful Jewish naming looms large in our history, I conclude, it is ultimately the strong impact of the *internal* Jewish naming, the impact of the storyteller, the religious scholar, and the German Jewish culture they embodied, that made the difference in each narrator's journey. For me, then, my book bears witness to the concept of Judaism as essentially a family affair, held as *story*. As in our texts! One by one, each of us found ourselves compelled to experience ourselves as Jews, mostly willingly, with a sense of relief, more rarely unwillingly, at the margins perhaps, yet forming, in my book's last words, "our own beautiful, fragmentary constellation."[v]

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i My parents converted in 1933 in Berlin on the eve of their marriage and departure for Rome, my father's a conversion of conviction, my mother's not so much, both keenly aware that their new religion could not protect them given the terms of the first of what would become a series of race laws.

ii Angela Kuttner Botelho, *German Jews and the Persistence of Jewish Identity in Conversion: Writing the Jewish Self* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), xv–xvi.

iii Actually, the conversion rate in Berlin hovered at roughly 7 percent between 1770 and 1874, according to scholars, arguably belying the *Taufepidemie* concept.

iv Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 306–307.

v Botelho, *German Jews and the Persistence of Jewish Identity*, 98. The image originates in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), 462.

Teaching with **Film and Media**

Curated by Olga Gershenson

Pope Pius IX holds the young Edgardo. Screenshot from Kidnapped.

Kidnapped: The Abduction of Edgardo Mortara **(*Rapito*. Dir. Marco Bellocchio, 2023, 134 min)**

Olga Gershenson

This new historical drama, adapted from Daniele Scalise's book, is based on the real-life story of a forced conversion. The plot centers on Edgardo Mortara, a six-year-old Jewish Italian boy who is abducted by papal authorities from his family in 1858. The maid claims she baptized the boy as a baby, and that is considered sufficient grounds for his removal. The family resists by all means possible, and after the boy is taken to Rome, they mount an impressive media campaign, but to no avail. The boy remains with the pope, receives a Catholic education, and although he initially recites the Shema dutifully, he ultimately becomes a true believer. The real Edgardo Mortara lived a long life within the church and died in 1940. Alongside this stirring story, the film also depicts the antipapal revolt in Italy and the experiences of Italian Jews and their relationships with power.

Several aspects of the movie are noteworthy: first, it tells the story entirely from a Jewish perspective, as opposed to a Catholic one. Thus, the family's observance is portrayed with respect and understanding. Second, the film is heavily invested in historical detail, not just in terms of costumes and settings, but also languages. Besides Italian and Latin, we hear Hebrew prayers and even some Yiddishisms in the scenes where members of the Jewish community talk among themselves. Finally, the film provides significant insight into a case of forced conversion, and its discussion can open up broader subjects of Jewish history, religion, and identities.

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BlacKkKlansman
(Dir. Spike Lee, 2018, 134 minutes)
Jonathan Branfman

BlacKkKlansman follows a white Jewish policeman, Flip, and Black non-Jewish policeman, Ron, who pass as white Christian supremacists to investigate the Ku Klux Klan. Analyzing this film can help students defuse two common misconceptions: that discussing antisemitism automatically downplays the white privilege that many American Jews experience, or conversely, that discussing this white privilege automatically trivializes antisemitism. Studying *BlacKkKlansman* illuminates how antisemitism, racism, and white privilege constantly interact (rather than cancel each other out). The film especially illustrates how these forces jointly produce what David Schraub called "conditional whiteness" for Jews with white skin in the United States. That is, white-skinned Jews experience many forms of white privilege, such as safety from police violence, but can never be sure when this privilege may give way to racial stigma or danger, including white supremacist violence like the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting.

Although conditional whiteness can sound abstract, *BlacKkKlansman*'s leading duo make it concrete. Within the police force, white privilege ensures social acceptance for the Jewish Flip, while his Black partner, Ron, faces racial discrimination and even brutality from fellow police. Further, Flip's white skin lets him enter Klan meetings—but if he's exposed as Jewish, the Klan will kill him. Indeed, Flip nearly meets this fate when a suspicious Klansman forces him at gun-point into a lie-detector test about whether he's Jewish. As Flip wavers between white racial safety and Jewish racial unsafety on screen, this scene offers students a concrete foundation for investigating how white privilege, color-based racism, and racial antisemitism intersect in real life.

Streaming on Amazon Prime, YouTube, Apple TV, and other platforms.

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A Klansman (on the left) forces the undercover Jewish policeman, Flip (on the right), to take a lie-detector test about being Jewish. Screenshot from BlacKkKlansman.

During an incomprehensible situation that has lasted over a year and has had severe academic consequences, AJS has provided me with a supportive academic community. This is not only reflected in the intellectual enrichment it offers but also in its understanding of the complex challenges facing academics in Israel today. AJS has been a significant help while I'm trying to progress in my research under difficult circumstances.

—Omer Waldman,
Hebrew University of Jerusalem

As a postdoctoral scholar without dedicated research funding, receiving the AJS Contingent Faculty and Independent Scholar Research Grant was incredibly meaningful. This generous support enabled me to complete crucial archival research for my book and begin writing the manuscript!

—Martina Mampieri,
University of Pennsylvania and University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

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