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WHAT SHOULD A CATHOLIC KNOW? SHIFTING  
TRENDS IN THE PREPARATION OF A JEWISH  
CATECHUMEN FOR BAPTISM IN 18-20-CENTURY  
LITHUANIA

The mission of the Roman Catholic Church to the Jews has been a complex story of different outlooks, changing approaches and complicated interactions between the clergy and the Jewish minority. Meanings that ordinary Christians, churchmen and especially missionaries ascribed to the existence and proximity of Jews varied through the ages and the understanding of the roles of both agents in the contexts of Christendom, Messianic feelings or God's plan took new forms. Emphasis on the necessity of converting the Jews was shifting, but it was a constantly debated issue, influenced and altered by changing political environment and sociocultural conditions. This process of transformation is especially evident in the territory of Lithuania that was subject to many different political environments throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. This article will analyze one of the components of the conversional procedure – the preparation of a Jewish catechumen for baptism in the Catholic Church. By looking into the constituents of this process, defined loosely as “becoming a Catholic”, we will try to describe what specific changes took place in the preparation of a Jew for a Catholic life and what tools and skills were considered necessary or sufficient to take upon the sacrament. Most importantly, we will evaluate how adequate and thorough the knowledge transferred by a member of clergy to a convert from Judaism was as well as how its content varied in different periods of time. The enquiry will also question the very possibility of one being fully prepared for smooth integration into the Catholic society in the

light of how nominal, one-sided and superficial certain preparation practices conducted by churchmen often were.

When preparing a Jewish catechumen to receive the sacrament of baptism, there were always several key demands to be met: good understanding of the faith and its proclaimed truths as well as proof of sincerity in one's decision that must come from inner religious calling. However, looking at a longer period of time, namely, from the end of the 18th century to 1941, when the majority of the Lithuanian Jewry perished and there were no more baptism cases, we can observe modifications of the main elements in preparing a Jewish catechumen for conversion – namely, in terms of religious literature, teaching and examining. By analysing these elements we can evaluate efforts of the Catholic Church, or lack thereof, to develop a thorough system for preparing neophytes. This article covers periods when the Lithuanian territory was under rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire that ruled Lithuania throughout the nineteenth century and the interwar Lithuanian Republic, ending with an overview of the Holocaust situation; this will allow to see how the understanding of ways to approach and prepare a potential Jewish convert changed along with social and cultural shifts in the territory. There is a rich historiography on Jewish conversions in various periods and regions<sup>1</sup>, mainly focusing

<sup>1</sup> Main texts dedicated to Jewish conversions in the East European region, just to name a few: Jacob Goldberg, “Żydowsy konwertyci w społeczeństwie staropolskim”, in: *Spółeczeństwo staropolskie*, vol. 4, Warszawa, 1986; Michael Stanislawski, “Jewish Apostasy in Russia: a Tentative Typology”, in: *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, ed. Todd M. Endelmann, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987, pp. 189–205; Mikhail Agursky, “Conversions of Jews to Christianity in Russia”, in: *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, 1990, vol. 20, no. 2–3, pp. 69–84; Todd M. Endelman, “Jewish Converts in Nineteen-Century Warsaw: A Quantitative Analysis”, in: *Jewish Social Studies*, 1997–1998, vol. 4, no. 1; Chaeran Freeze, “When Chava Left Home: Gender, Conversion, and the Jewish Family in Tsarist Russia”, in: *Polin*, vol. 18, pp. 154–188; John D. Klier, “State Policies and the Conversion of Jews in Imperial Russia”, in: *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in tsarist Russia*, eds. Robert P. Geraci, Michael Khodorkovsky, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 92–112; Magda Teter, “Jewish Conversions to Catholicism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries”, in: *Jewish History*, 2003, vol. 17, issue 3, pp. 257–283; Artur Markowski, “Konwersje Żydów w północno-wschodnich regionach

on the issues of changing a convert's legal status and characteristics of Jews who decided to change their religious affiliation. However, there is little specific focus on the means of ensuring one's sufficient readiness for conversion, as well as on how the content of this process changed over time. Research in this article is based a corpus of Jewish baptismal files<sup>2</sup> and religious literature. The former are mostly individual files composed of correspondence between religious and secular institutions and statements of Jewish catechumens. The religious literature used here is mainly one specifically targeting Jews as potential converts or Catholics who might be interested in the missionary activity<sup>3</sup>.

#### ATTEMPTS TO CREATE AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM FOR EASIER INTEGRATION OF JEWISH CONVERTS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Back in 1741, a convert, or a churchman undersigned as a neophyte<sup>4</sup>, Jan Krzysztof Lewek, wrote that the essential assistance needed for a Jew converting to Christianity is financial help to make the

Królestwa Polskiego w pierwszej połowie XIX wieku”, in: *Studia Judaica*, 2006, vol. 9, no. 1 (17), pp. 3–32; *W poszukiwaniu religii doskonałej? Konwersja a Żydzi*, ed. Agnieszka Jagodzińska, Wrocław: Wydawn. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Jewish baptism files are kept in: *Lithuanian State Historical Archives* (henceforth – LVIA), f. 604, f. 669 and f. 694; *Manuscript Department of the Wróblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences* (henceforth – LMAVB RS), f. 318; *Manuscript Department of Vilnius University Library* (henceforth – VUB RS), f. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Such as Jan Chryzostom Gintyllo, *Mokslas krikščioniškas zemajtiškaj parašitas / Christian science laid out in Samogitian: Kunigo Jono Krizostomo Gintilos žemaitiškas katekizmas hebrajų rašmenimis*, ed. Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė, Vilnius: Lietuvių kalbos institutas, 2009; Jan Chryzostom Gintyllo, *Nauka czytania po polsku dla młodzi wyznania starozakonnego*, Wilno: druk i nakład Zawadzkiego, 1817; Frederyk Pistol, *Żydowstwo i Chryścijaństwo czyli słowa prawdy do braci w Izraelu*, Wilno: Wydawnictwo Misyj Wewnętrznych Archidiecezji Wileńskiej, 1933; Frederyk Pistol, *Misja nawracania Żydów*, Wilno: Wydawnictwo Misyj Wewnętrznych Archidiecezji Wileńskiej, 1932; Wincenty Danek, *Katechizm dla konwertytów*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Apostolstwa Modlitwy, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> This is debatable, Magda Teter seems to doubt if the author is actually a newly converted Jew, see Magda Teter, “Jewish Conversions to Catholicism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries”, in: *Jewish History*, 2003, vol. 17, issue 3, pp. 269–270.

transition, zealous teachers and a set of “useful”, non-exploitative skills<sup>5</sup>. Lewek envisioned the proper circumstances for catechumens’ education to be mutually inspirational for both, the potential neophytes and the missionaries:

If those who want to convert were assigned a place and stable provisions or if there was a foundation for their livelihood, there would be enough zealous teachers and apostolic men who could, with the help of God’s grace [...] attract many souls and direct them in the path of eternal salvation.<sup>6</sup>

The advice was heard by Józef Stefan Turczynowicz, the priest founder of the *Mariae Vitae* female congregation that was confirmed in 1752 by Pope Benedict XIV and Vilnius Bishop Michał Zienkiewicz. Since then, we have a clearer understanding of how a Jewish catechumen (at least female) was led towards baptism. The Rule of the Congregation<sup>7</sup> included the unique Sixth chapter which ordered to

provide [*converts*] with food and appropriate clean clothing according to the possibilities and needs, and keep them [*in the convent*] until they figure out and are provided with a means for living.<sup>8</sup>

The social programme of the Mariavites was created with the prevention of apostasy in mind. That was what made this Congregation exceptional in the context of the Church policies towards non-Christians at the time. Most importantly, it was forbidden to let catechumen out of the convent and it was obligatory to take care of them and find them an occupation in a Christian environment afterwards so they were not tempted to apostatize, sometimes keeping a girl for a while or placing her somewhere safely so she did not wander back to her family. These

<sup>5</sup> “Z literatury antyżydowskiej w Polsce XVIII wieku (Jan Krzysztof Lewek, List pewnego statysty, Wilno 1741)”, published by Bogdan Rok, in: *Z historii ludności żydowskiej w Polsce i na Śląsku*, Wrocław: Wydawn. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1994, pp. 222–223.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>7</sup> Małgorzata Borkowska OSB, “Regula druga mariawitek”, in: *Nasza Przeszość*, Kraków, 2000, vol. 94, pp. 333–347.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

elements were meant to guarantee smooth integration of a neophyte into the new society and create a new “social face” for a neophyte: a new set of religious practices, a way of living, a name and a surname, an occupation, etc. So all in all, the process of preparation for the conversion was not limited to teaching how to be a Catholic, but more than that – how to be a fully functioning individual in the Catholic society, in the Congregation’s case, someone’s wife with necessary female skills like cooking, washing, sewing and gardening; as Turczynowicz himself put it, Jewesses were poor and stray and absolutely incapable of work<sup>9</sup>. Nonetheless, despite this seemingly well-considered system, the Mariavites were constantly struggling financially in their everyday lives, which inevitably reflected badly on the process of missionizing. We do not have many statements from neophyte girls, however, in one of them, a catechumen says:

but what of it, when instead of learning prayers and other religious basics, I was tortured with work – I had to take care of livestock, wash clothes, cook, pick vegetables in the garden and so on. [...] Mother Superior told me that, firstly, I must work for a whole year and only after that were they going to start preparing me.<sup>10</sup>

The preparation of the catechumen was eclipsed by the need to survive, thus altering the girl’s illusions about the life-changing period of preparation<sup>11</sup>.

Comparing a single baptism file from the year 1787 and three available ones from 1818, all concerning male converts, we can see that a questionnaire, a so-called “examination”, was applied when admitting one to the Catholic Church as new Jewish communities were entering

<sup>9</sup> “List okolny fundatora siostr Maryawitek s. p. X. Kanonika Turczynowicza”, in: *Dzieje dobroczynności*, Wilno: Typografia A. Marcinowskiego, 1820, pp. 392–395.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted after: Krzysztof Lewalski, *Kościół chrześcijański w Królestwie Polskim wobec Żydów w latach 1855–1915*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2002, p. 184.

<sup>11</sup> More on the history and activity of the Mariavites please see Elena Keidosiute, “Missionary activity of *Mariae Vitae* Congregation”, in: *PaRDeS. Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien / PaRDeS. Journal of the association of Jewish Studies*, Potsdam, 2010, pp. 57–72.

the complicated confessional picture of the Russian Empire. It focused mostly on the most basic personal information (age, place of origin), confirmed sincerity and motivation of the act of conversion. The very term of examination can be questioned here, since it was more of a bureaucratic measure to ensure free will of an applicant, as few problems in the transition as possible and proceed with administrative changes arising from individual's changed position in the social scheme of estates. The questionnaire also asked a person to provide some information on what they were planning to do after baptism – what they were to work, what work they were capable of and if there was any threat of apostasy in the light of possible financial difficulties after baptism. The Russian authorities initially took over the practices used in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, simplified them and, in the cases from the late 1830s (up until the end), a statement by a catechumen and a protocol from the local police authority with the basic details of an individual's registration<sup>12</sup>, age and place of origin would suffice. Specific duration of the preparation period, often referred to as the “probation” (in Russian “испытание”), when a catechumen stayed in a monastery or presbytery, is not stated, but sources suggest it mostly varied from six months to a year. However, the prolongation of the period was not always necessarily due to lengthy teaching, but rather complicated bureaucracy that the Catholic Church was subjected to in the Empire. Nonetheless, we can assume that this period of time should have been considered more or less sufficient to transfer basic knowledge to a catechumen, but not necessarily a complete know-how of living in an entirely different social environment. In the case of the Mariavites, to teach some basic skills to survive in a new community, even though the teaching was confined to within the walls of the convent with no real practice outside. Catholic Consistory also had to receive two certificates from a churchman preparing a Jew: one about the catechumen's good behavior and the second one about his or her adequate knowledge on questions of faith. When it came to “good behavior”, in most cases this concerned diligence while studying and avoiding interaction with the outside world,

<sup>12</sup> In rare cases an applicant would expand upon the jobs of his or her parents.

especially the native Jewish community, or indecent behavior (in the sources, this would usually include inappropriate liaisons, drinking and making forays into the nearest city<sup>13</sup>). When catechumens were clearly manipulating the situation and did not respect the clergy, the Roman Catholic Consistory would not hesitate to terminate the conversion process. First, the authorities made efforts to grant a catechumen one more chance to come around by sending him or her to another parish or monastery<sup>14</sup>. If no improvement was observed, the clergy member preparing for baptism was instructed to ask the catechumen him or her to leave<sup>15</sup>. Despite this, there were cases of individuals who were far from being exemplary believers to see the day of conversion. Even after such seemingly unambiguous verdicts as

she avoids being acquainted with the Christian teachings and following them, she does not want to know the Christian reconciliation and piety, she holds onto ill Jewish habits and justifies them, she avoids any, even smallest domestic work [...] In short, there is no hope for her to become an exemplary Christian<sup>16</sup>,

or suspicions of theft and continuous relations with Jewish brethren<sup>17</sup>, catechumens would get another chance and eventually, after a year or so, come back and get baptised. It is impossible to say now if, after sufficient time, a person would arrive at a significant change of heart; however, it is safe to suggest that the decisive voice here was that of a member of the clergy of the lower ranks who was preparing the catechumen to get baptised. It was their patience and good will or determination to ignore some of their pupils' not-quite-proper behaviour in the name of greater numbers of the newly admitted to the Catholic church that influenced the outcome of a baptismal case.

We cannot firmly specify what kind of religious curriculum each

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *LVIA*, f. 604-5-3371, 3544, 3879, 8245.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *LVIA*, f. 604-5-3879, 8245.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *LVIA*, f. 604-5-6953, 3840.

<sup>16</sup> *LVIA*, f. 604-5-3480, fol. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *LVIA*, f. 604-5-4156.

catechumen received. What is pretty clear from the baptism files of the period is that an overwhelming portion of Jews who turned to the Catholic Church were illiterate (or barely literate)<sup>18</sup>, so the option of educating via religious literature was not available and the truths of Catholicism had to be transferred orally, while ability to recite Catholic prayers was a proof of sufficient religious knowledge<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, the outcome of the preparation period was highly dependant on skills and dedication of a churchman or a churchwoman, whose ability to transfer knowledge and piety as well as understand a Jewish catechumen would lead to a successful conversion. However, being educated by a clergyman was hardly a guarantee of adequate disposition for a smooth transition to the everyday life in the Catholic environment, unless one's teacher or a sponsor provided or helped to find the means to make a living<sup>20</sup>.

There is one curious example, possibly created, in part, in response to the problem of the Jews' illiteracy in non-Jewish languages. It concerns writings of a rather controversial figure, Samogitian Bishop<sup>21</sup> Jan Chryzostom Gintyło (1788–1857), who targeted the Jewish audience and laid out texts in Yiddish and Samogitian in Hebrew characters; most importantly, he wrote a Catholic catechism<sup>22</sup>. Gintyło

<sup>18</sup> According to my calculations almost 70 % of the catechumens in Vilnius and Telšiai Dioceses were illiterate, and the rest were literate or barely literate, i.e. they could put a signature in Russian or in Hebrew characters. However, it is worth noting that inability to sign did not necessarily mean inability to read. This nuance is difficult to estimate, more on this see Shaul Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis and Education. Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe*, Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation, 2010, chapter "Literacy among Jews in Eastern Europe in the Modern Period", pp. 190–210.

<sup>19</sup> For example, in a case of baptism of Chaia Ichelevna (1844) administrator of Wiłkomierz (Ukmergė) church rejoices over her ability to say prayers from memory, in: *VUB RS*, f. 57-B54-134, fol. 3.

<sup>20</sup> There were cases when nuns would find dowries and husbands for girls, or Christians would take upon care of a convert.

<sup>21</sup> He was nominated as a bishop by the tsar. However, this position was never confirmed by the pope. Gintyło stayed in this position from 1844 until 1850.

<sup>22</sup> This corresponded with his general initiative that Catholicism should



was known as a Hebraist and was interested in issues of bringing Christian education to the Jews. Composing a Catechism in Hebrew letters allowed Gintyllo to expand his potential readership by including Jews who did not necessarily know Polish but were able to read any of the Jewish languages. It was structured mainly in the form of questions and answers – an old tradition that we will be able to trace right to the interwar period. Quite conventionally, it focused on the most debated issues between Jews and Christians: the nature of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the notion of the Holy Trinity and the connection of both Testaments and the promise of the New Testament in the Old Testament. It also made an attempt to explain the primacy of Catholicism above all the other Christian denominations. However, it never became a properly employed tool in the preparation of Jewish catechumens, since, for whatever reasons, it was never published nor used in practice and stayed more of an ambitious private experiment of Gintyllo.

The only published text by Gintyllo was *The science of reading in Polish for the young believers in the faith of the Old Testament*<sup>23</sup>. The textbook for Jews to learn Polish emphasizes how immanently the Polish language – the tongue of the Catholic religion and prayer in the region in the nineteenth century – was considered to be the main tool of spreading Christianity and surely not by the bishop alone. According to the Jewish baptism files available from the middle of the nineteenth century, mainly from 1848–1857, churchmen did not avoid corresponding in Polish. Moreover, Jewish catechumens also reasoned their transition more than solely in theological terms: “in order to know the Catechism better and praise the Lord better, I am

be reinforced by using local languages in the pastoral work. More on his efforts, the analysis and the publication of the whole text see Jan Chryzostom Gintyllo, *Mokslas krikščioniskas zemajtiškaj parašitas*; see also Arvydas Pacevičius, “Jonas Krizostomas Gintila: keli Žemaičių bibliofilo portreto bruožai”, in: *Alsėdžiai* (ser. *Žemaičių praeitis*, 10), Vilnius, 2002, pp. 233–244; Ieva Šenavičienė, “Gintila Jonas Krizostomas”, in: *Žemaičių Kalvarijos mokykla 1803–1836*, ed. Arvydas Pacevičius, Vilnius, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Jan Chryzostom Gintyllo, *Nauka czytania po polsku dla młodzi wyznania starozakonnego*, Wilno, 1817.

learning the Polish language”<sup>24</sup>; or stated a wish to embrace the “Polish faith”<sup>25</sup>. These examples, although sparse, testify to the complicated relation between religious and ethnic identities as well as to the blurred distinction between the Poles and the Lithuanians (not to mention a major ethnic group of Belorussians in the region), thus suggesting that teaching the Catholic faith and its language was also teaching one to belong to a totally different ethnos.

#### REVISION AND INHERITED TRADITIONS OF APPROACHING A JEWISH CATECHUMEN IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

After the fall of the Russian Empire and WWI, such practices were overshadowed by more urgent calamities and transformations. As we move on to the period of the interwar, when the Catholic Church gained back its strength and independence from the overly tight bureaucracy and could once again focus on evangelization, we can notice some subtle changes in the understanding of missionizing of Jews. It was influenced by the modernization of both Christian and Jewish communities and the nation states they ended up in. Unfortunately, due to scarcity of sources, little can be said about the catechesis or written material employed in Lithuania at this point. Merely a couple of priests mention the preparation period of half a year<sup>26</sup>, and others do not specify the period before baptism. Only in one of the files do we have a priest mention a catechumen to be learning from a catechism written by Koncevičius<sup>27</sup>, which was actually intended for children preparing for the First Communion. Most likely, there was little Catholic religious literature targeted at the Jews in Lithuania at the time.

The situation in Vilnius region, annexed by Poland, is more eloquent

<sup>24</sup> LVIA, f. 694-1-1991, fol. 54.

<sup>25</sup> LVIA, f. 694-1-1854, fol. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Half a year, in: LVIA, f. 1671-5-516, fol. 26; each Sunday for half a year, LVIA, f. 1671-5-505, fol. 159.

<sup>27</sup> Most likely: Juozas Končius-Koncevičius, *Trumpas katekizmas: vadovėlis pradžios mokykloms ir pirmai vaikų išpažinčiai*, Vilnius: „Zničo“ sp., 1918.

and diverse. At this point, we should begin by briefly introducing the Section for converting Jews that was established in Vilnius Archdiocese in 1929 as a part of a wider net of the Society of Interior Missions (*Towarzystwo Misyj Wewnętrznych Sekcja Nawracania Żydów*). Before that, the Society had been named after St. John, but that year it was renamed the Section for converting Jews<sup>28</sup>. As the Chairman of the Section, priest Stanisław Miłkowski, put it, the St. John Society had had barely 20 members and its activity had not been very productive; and only after its reorganization in April 1929 into one specifically aimed at Jewish conversion, had it been revived and begun to develop<sup>29</sup>. In June 1930 it had 170 members in Vilnius and 10 members outside of the city<sup>30</sup>. That year the Society took care, “morally and financially”<sup>31</sup>, of 15 Jews (four baptised earlier, probably before the establishment of the Society, two baptised before June 1930 and nine catechumens). The exact date when the Society was closed is unknown – the last available correspondence of priest Miłkowski is dated 1 December 1931<sup>32</sup>.

As mentioned above, the chairman of the Section was priest Miłkowski, but the mission was *de facto* lead by a convert Jew, Frederyk Pistol, who came to Vilnius from Lviv. He had been born into a Jewish Orthodox family, who had hoped he would become a rabbi. Thus he was well-educated and well-versed in Jewish religious literature. This knowledge of his is well reflected in one of his published books, *Jewishness and Christianity or the words of truth to brothers of Israel*<sup>33</sup>, that was dedicated to revealing the immanent connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It was clearly meant for potential Jewish converts or, to some extent, assimilated (since the book is in Polish and not in Yiddish, only Biblical quotes are in

<sup>28</sup> Miłkowski’s Report, in: *LMAVB RS*, f. 318-34598, fol. 76.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Miłkowski’s letter to a person in Dzisna, in: *LMAVB RS*, f. 318-34598, fol. 116.

<sup>33</sup> Frederyk Pistol, *Żydostwo i Chrześcijaństwo czyli słowa prawdy do braci w Izraelu*, Wilno, 1933.

Hebrew) literate religiously-educated Jews. Throughout his book, Pistol attempted to emphasize an undeniable connection between the Old and the New Testaments, he referred to the prophets and criticized Jewish commentators. He compared two different religious systems, calling both religions equally Jewish<sup>34</sup>, arriving at the conclusion that Judaism was not the faith of Moses and the prophets anymore, since its believers were misled by a set of false beliefs of Talmud. Pistol also explained some verses in the New Testament and called upon the Israelites to open their hearts as the first Christians, Jews themselves, once had. By going through the Old Testament step by step, and analysing and explaining passages that had supposedly been misinterpreted or misunderstood, he tried to convince the Jews of a purely rational approach of textual analysis which exposed that “*Jews, who became believers of the opposite system [meaning Judaism], did not have reason the same way their ancestors hadn’t [meaning those who rejected the teachings of Jesus]*”<sup>35</sup>.

In his other book, *The mission of converting the Jews*<sup>36</sup>, that Pistol wrote on the basis of his own lecture, the convert related a story of his own path toward conversion and also presented a dialogue he supposedly once had with a certain Jew, on religious issues. It could also be viewed as a tutorial for anyone willing to missionize. Pistol was convinced that religious Jews, or Talmudic Jews as he called them, were always keen to discuss faith, so there was hope to convert them this way, by persuasion. Another group, the secular Jews or as he also called them, “progressive Jews” (quotation marks by Pistol), was a more complicated issue, since the work of convincing them in the existence of God in general had to be accomplished first. To this group he mainly ascribed sionists, bundists and socialists<sup>37</sup>. Here again he urged the Jews to seek answers in the Scripture, suggesting that only by analysing the holy text or having someone to analyse and explain it

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Frederyk Pistol, *Misja nawracania Żydów*, Wilno, 1932.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

to them will one truly enlighten one's mind. Pistol also insisted that a place for Jewish catechumens to gather, where someone would discuss faith with them, tell them about the Gospels and where to find religious literature, including Jewish, was essential for the preparation to join the community of Christians<sup>38</sup>. Some of the steps towards that kind of arrangement were taken shortly.

The Section offered courses of the Polish and German languages, in that way seeking a path towards Jewish souls via linguistic education – very likely in the hope of making rich religious literature available to them. It is worth noticing that due to strong cultural and linguistic nationalism in Poland, the idea of reaching the Jews via religious literature translated into Yiddish was completely abandoned. The tradition of immanently interconnecting the Polish language and the Catholic faith as essential constituents of Polishness not only continued but also got stronger. A reading room in Vilnius, offering collections of literature on religious topics, was also opened and would host readings of the Bible twice a week. We can see that, in the interwar period, the strategy of missionaries changed in response to transformation of the Jewish community itself – higher literacy rates called for a more diverse approach and offered more ways to do it, while awareness of Christian modes of life via some level of acculturation made the preparation less to do with acquiring a completely foreign way of thinking and behaving. However, both initiatives were not very successful and somewhat secondary, since Pistol put most of his energy into private conversations with potential neophytes. Communication and personal connection with potential Jewish converts was the main method for seeking out new members of the Church. As Pistol put in his book on missions to the Jews,

It shouldn't be only about the quantity, but about the baptism itself. A Jew admitted to the true Church has to be not only baptised, but also converted. Jews have to be convinced in the true religion.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Pistol was aware that many Jews converted for very worldly considerations, but he nonetheless believed that every effort had to be made in order to actually convince them in the supremacy of Christianity, and this work had to be done paying attention to the Jewish “customs, way of thinking and psychology”<sup>40</sup>. This ambivalence speaks of both that each person had to be approached individually and also that Jews composed a separate and unique group with a set of certain group traits that had to be appreciated and possibly fought by a missionary. Pistol, a former insider, shared the knowledge about the Jewish community that the Catholic clergy and believers supposedly did not have, however, his claims were in fact just old truths: Jews had to be approached via the Old Testament’s connection with the New Testament and that a Jew was actually able to become a good and sincere Catholic, once persuaded into the right faith (the latter was far from an accepted truth, as scepticism prevailed among a great part of the Catholic clergy).

If we analyse the corpus of baptism files, both from the interwar Vilnius region and the independent Republic of Lithuania between 1918 and 1940, we do not find much evidence to support the idea of a very thorough process of conversion. Curias did not supervise very closely the diligence of a parish priest preparing catechumens. We only have a few files where an explicit list of materials for a catechumen is presented. For example, a Karkažiškės parish priest told Vilnius Curia in 1935 that he presented the following literature to three catechumen girls: the Old and the New Testament, the History of the Catholic Church, Dogmatics, Catholic Ethics and Wincenty Danek’s Catechism<sup>41</sup> for converts<sup>42</sup>. The latter, which evidently reached Vilnius Archdiocese, was also composed in the form of questions and answers. It had separate chapters for each non-Catholic denomination. The one dedicated to the Jews was the most voluminous one, as Jews were said to be further from the Catholic truths than all the others. A fictional dialogue between a Catholic and a Jew yet again focused on outlining

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Wincenty Danek, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> *LMAVB RS*, f. 318-21973, fol. 1.

the truths shared by both the Jews and the Catholics, passages in the Old Testament connecting both faiths, the nature of Jesus Christ as the Messiah and the Holy Trinity.

THE AMBIVALENT (NON)PREPARATION OF  
JEWS FOR BAPTISM IN 1941

Before looking any closer into the situation of 1941, it is worth mentioning that Lithuanian Catholic Curias did notice a growing number of Jews willing to baptise in the context of the Holocaust. By that time Vilnius region had already been incorporated into the territory of the Republic of Lithuania. According to calculations based on the numbers of Jewish baptismal files available from the interwar period and the year 1941, it can be estimated 187 people expressed their wish to get baptised in both the Republic of Lithuania and Vilnius region between the wars, whereas in 1941 alone 114 Jews applied for conversion – most of them, 102, in the second half of that year, when atrocities inflicted upon the Jews were in full swing. And these are only the ones that were officially recorded and at least partially processed.

People who took part in rescuing Jews or were witnessing efforts by others during the Holocaust in Lithuania mention in their memoirs cases when priests would issue fake baptismal documents or would date them a few years back so they would not seem that recent<sup>43</sup>. These testimonies should be judged with caution, since they were written some time after the war and the information they provide is inevitably selective. Prelate Mykolas Krupavičius (1885–1970) wrote in 1962 that Jewish baptisms were becoming a mass phenomenon which made the Church authorities to warn their subordinates not to baptise solely because of the current circumstances and to inform Jewish catechumens that receiving the sacrament would hardly help them or be a solution to their problems<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> See *Išgelbėję pasaulį... Žydų gelbėjimas Lietuvoje (1941–1944)*, eds. Dalia Kuodytė, Rimantas Stankevičius, Vilnius: Lietuvos Gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, 2001.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Some priests who helped the persecuted ended up in prisons. Sofija Lukauskaitė-Jasaitienė (1901–1981), a prominent public figure and émigrée, wrote in 1946 that people would often try to save Jewish children by issuing them new birth certificates and adults by granting them new identity documents<sup>45</sup>; naturally, these are the cases that did not end up among the official baptismal files mentioned above. Memoirs tell us of both successful and tragic outcomes of such endeavours, most often determined by mere luck and mercy of a prosecutor.

When it comes to the warnings by the church authorities, Prelate Krupavičius most likely had in mind two editions of very similar instructions on Jewish conversion that were issued in Kaunas Diocese and Vilnius Archdiocese<sup>46</sup>. Both singled out Jews as exceptional potential neophytes and warned that the procedure of their conversion had to be handled with utmost diligence. Priests were urged not to take the matter lightly and to collect all evidence that the conversion was sincere and not motivated by fear. The instruction issued in Vilnius said:

When it comes to Jews, [...] we continue to demand a period of evaluation for those who convert to the Church of Christ. Both the faith and the morals have to be evaluated. Current special circumstances demand a greater and longer evaluation.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, the instruction issued in Kaunas stated: ...the Holy Baptism should not be granted to individuals of the Jewish nationality without a proper all-round investigation<sup>48</sup>. Interestingly enough, despite a seemingly strict tone of the instructions, they did not outline any new specific recommendations or stricter rules that had not been employed before and remained quite laconic. They hardly indicated how that “evaluation” had to be conducted and what concrete measures it entailed or what proof of eligibility would be considered sufficient. Apparently, the Church authorities did not find it necessary to make

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>46</sup> *LMAVB RS*, f. 318-23035, ff. 2–4; *LVIA*, f. 1671, ap. 5, b. 134, fol. 11.

<sup>47</sup> *LMAVB RS*, f. 318-23041, fol. 4.

<sup>48</sup> *LVIA*, f. 1671-5-134, fol. 11.



more detailed guidelines available, thus suggesting that they were mostly nominal, which is not to say that the Church encouraged insincerity, it simply left a free hand for priests willing to help the Jews and some of them used this opportunity. Baptism files from 1941 show that the tradition of rather limited catechumens' education prevailed and, moreover, in the light of the difficult circumstances the Jews found themselves in, was often skipped. Sources show that permissions to baptise by the Curia were issued very quickly following applications or even on the same day. During the Holocaust, there is no mention of lengthy one-year periods of preparation in the fashion of nineteenth-century practices. When it comes to fake documents or ones dated retrospectively, there can be no question about proper education (or even proper applications) and the need to react to violent events trumped thoroughness.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are several observations to be made. The procedure of preparation and its constitution was gradually getting simpler and shorter. However, core elements of the theological approach to Jewish conversion remained unchanged and focused on the same issues they had in the greater part of the Jewish-Catholic debates. Reaching the Jews via the most questionable issues – like the figure of Jesus Christ as a Messiah or the Holy Trinity – laid out in the form of questions and answers or a private dialogue prevailed. However, they were more of use for preparing missionaries. Leading one to baptism was never limited to theological education. The social dimension of the conversional transformation was always an issue and, moreover, there was a constant cry for a better system of social integration, namely, a place for catechumens to gather and interact with properly-trained and zealous teachers. However, it was never fully developed and the issue was mostly neglected by churchmen. The Church and its missionaries made attempts to include some knowledge and social skills that would help converts become a properly integrated element of the Catholic society, be it via a set of working skills or, most often, the language of

the dominant community. Nevertheless, it had never turned into a fully-developed system, with the exception of the *Mariae Vitae* Congregation which was nevertheless unable to bring it to its full potential due to limited material resources. Finally, during the Holocaust, the social dimension of Jewish integration into the gentile society was completely displaced by the need to “dissolve” in that society as quickly and as quietly as possible.