

PhD Thesis

Abstract

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Biographical Illustrations, Proselytes and their acceptance to Judaism  
between the 9th and 19th Centuries

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## I Subject and aim of the research 2013

On 24<sup>th</sup> October 1977 I received a letter from Rabbi Dr Professor Alexander Scheiber (Zichrono Li v'racha) suggesting that I write a dissertation/paper on proselytes, particularly about their lives in more detail than was available at the time.

Conversion to Judaism has been part of my life as a progressive Rabbi since my studies at both the rabbinical Seminary in Budapest and Leo Baeck College London.

Conversion to Judaism has always been part of Jewish life indeed since the time of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12:1-9). There does not appear to be a century where there were no converts in spite of legal, and other disabilities bringing mortal danger, and in many instances death to those who converted. My intention was to bring some lives of individual converts to public attention and so I have chosen individuals from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, illustrating their lives and highlighting my views in respect of some of those whose lives had been written but who may not have existed, but who nevertheless had entered the myth of Jewish existence, such as Count Valentin Potocki.

The reason for recounting the mass conversion of the Khazaris was to demonstrate, that in spite of many millennia of persecution, even predating Christianity such as in the Roman Republic in 139 B.C.E, there were those who accepted Judaism as their religion. This was in spite of the fact that, for example, Emperor Domitian led a particularly merciless campaign against converts to Judaism<sup>1</sup> p.62. Conversion was regulated and became an offence e.g. during the rule of Hadrian, whose law was then codified by Constantine in 315 C.E.<sup>2</sup> It was important to bring the Khazaris as an example because there had been doubts expressed about the authenticity of their conversion. Therefore I was keen to demonstrate that just as with the individuals in

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<sup>1</sup> James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue : A Study of the Origins of Antisemitism* (New York: Hermon Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World : A Source Book, 315–1791* (Cincinnati: The Union of American Hebrew congregations, 1938).

my work, so with the Khazaris, a reality which has been part of Jewish history. A comprehensive Bibliography about the Khazaris was compiled by Kevin Alan Brook<sup>3</sup> Even in the fifth century there were converts, as shown in the pastoral letter of Gregory of Nyssa<sup>4</sup> and also in Spain during the rule of King Sisebut (612-620)<sup>5</sup>.

My research confirmed the wealth of material though it was much dispersed in many books articles and literature. I found that often only the name of an individual is mentioned and then very little else, which led to further research, and sometimes discovery of much more material and information. Although there are many more individuals than mentioned in my work, I believe that those illustrated here are positive and important samples of those who converted to Judaism. Many of the names mentioned in this work have been referred to elsewhere, though not in as much detail as appears in my work. I am also adding Eliza Nathan and Ernst Albert Emil von Mannheim<sup>6</sup>. It was also important to highlight my own views regarding Cornelio di Montalcino and Count Valentin Potocki<sup>7</sup>. In respect of the latter I discovered a new document at the Leo Baeck College Library in London,<sup>8</sup> which challenges previous views. Joseph H.Prouser writes and argues well but was still unconvincing. In my Thesis I am also clarifying the assumption that the Nazi von Mannheim converted to Judaism, as this was due to a mistaken identity and an unfortunate similarity of the names<sup>9</sup>. I have not dealt with the impact which free

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Alan Brook, 'Bibliography of Khazar Studies', (updated 26/02/2012) <[www.khazaria.com/khazar.biblio/toc.html](http://www.khazaria.com/khazar.biblio/toc.html)>, accessed 01/03/2012.

<sup>4</sup> James Parkes, *The Jew in the Medieval Community* (London: Soncino Press, 1938).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Barnett, *The Western Synagogue through Two Centuries (1761–1961)* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1961), Rev Dr S.N. Gut, 'An Unusual Proselyte', *The Jewish Monthly*, Vol. 4 /No 5 (1950), 265–67.

<sup>7</sup> Ha-Kohen Joseph and Pilar Ed Leon Tello, 'Emeq Ha-Bakha De Yosef Ha-Kohen (Biblioteca Hebraicoespañola, V. 8; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Arias Montano, 1964) 483 p, Avram Karpinovitsh, *Die Geschichte Fun Vilner Ger-Tsedek Graf Valentin Pototski* (Tel Aviv: Vilner Pinkas, 1990), Joseph H. Prouser, *Noble Soul : The Life and Legend of the Vilna Ger Tzedek Count Walenty Potocki* (Judaism in Context, V. 1; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> J Kagan, *Graf Potocki Der Ger -Cedek* (Warsaw: Drukarna Uniwersalna, 1920).

<sup>9</sup> Association Anglo-Jewish, 'The Jewish Monthly', *The Jewish monthly.*, 4/5 (August 1950 1950), 265.

societies may have had on conversions though my experience shows, having been Av Beth Din (head of a Liberal rabbinic Court) that there are less inhibitions or indeed fears connected with conversion, though again I found strong Jewish opposition particularly in Orthodox Jewish circles. I have also not dealt with conversions which occurred as a result of Jews owning slaves whether in the USA or elsewhere or during the Middle Ages. My greatest help in my research was the Booklet by Johanan Arnon<sup>10</sup> and the Hebrew version<sup>11</sup>, which I found in the Dusseldorf Jewish Library. I have not been able to locate Mr Arnon. I found his work comprehensive though sadly noted that his ambition to write more did not appear to have been fulfilled. I believe that I may have done some justice to what he has started and to the wishes of the late Alexander Scheiber. With regard to the latter I was fascinated to note his exchange of correspondence with Professor Norman Golb regarding the finding of some Geniza materials concerning Obadiah the Proselyte referred to in the *Jewish Chronicle* (London) articles of August (27) October (15) and December (31) 1965.

My paper goes beyond the existing research in its approach, research and conclusions. The purpose of the Thesis was to show the bravery of those who converted to Judaism and also that they were people with convictions as well as belief defying their period's established religious convictions. This work brings together prominent Christian personalities and shows how and why they converted and if possible what happened to them, bringing the information about them under "one roof" so to speak because the information is scattered throughout Jewish and non-Jewish literature.

At the request of my Supervisor Chief Rabbi Dr Istvan Doman I have briefly dealt with some of those who have converted from Judaism to Christianity but not of "conversos" in Spain or Portugal. However in connection with Bodo/Eleazar I

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<sup>10</sup> Johanan Arnon, Abraham Ben Abraham : Comprehensive Bibliography on Proselytes and Proselytism from the 9th Century up to Our Times (Tel Aviv: [s.n.], 1969).

<sup>11</sup> Johanan Arnon, Avraham Ben Avraham : Bibliyografyah Makifah `Al Gerim Ve-Giyur Min Ha-Meah Ha-Teshi`it Ve-`Ad Yamenu (Tel Aviv: [s.n.], 1969).

mentioned Alvaro, a convert from Judaism with some details, because there was a close connection between these two individuals.

The fascinating chapter of this part of Jewish history is the role of those Jews who converted in the Middle Ages and became censors of Jewish books<sup>12</sup>. There were those who passed Jewish publications quietly without raising any issues but others who did positive harm, turning against Jews and contributing to the work of the inquisition. For example there were two priests who passed the publication of the two Haggadot-Sarajevo and the Golden Haggadah, in spite of strict censorship laws.

Elisheva Carlebach published a comprehensive book on Jewish converts to Christianity in Germany<sup>13</sup>. See also in my Appendix a reference to Eve Cohan a woman convert to Christianity and her persecution by the Jewish community. The reason for her conversion was a marriage to a Christian and possibly dislike of her family.

I made attempts to discover the true identity of the illustrator of the Amsterdam Haggadah, Abraham ben Jacob but unfortunately without success. However I have shown that Abraham Haas was probably not a Hungarian because he was born in Mikulov, now and has always been part of what is now the Czech Republic-Bohemia/Moravia.

The reason for commencing with the 9<sup>th</sup> Century is that I wanted to deal with individuals after the mass conversion of the Khazars as well as to tell about conversions leading to the conversion of Obadiah, and Professor Scheiber's definitive discovery and discussion regarding him. I ended with the 19<sup>th</sup> century though covered one person coming to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (von Mannheim) as I did not wish to cover the complexities arising as a result of the two World Wars.

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<sup>12</sup> Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text : The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century* (Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) viii, 314 p.

<sup>13</sup> Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750* (Yale University Press, 2001).

I am also briefly covering the Hebrew terminology regarding “converts” as I felt it was important to clarify some of the confusions which have arisen when translating from the Bible, Talmud and Responsa sources. I have also highlighted the original laws of conversion as shown in the Shulchan Aruch and Talmud. Further I am explaining the general reasons gleaned from examining the personalities mentioned herein for conversion.

I feel that this Thesis, though limited, gives a more comprehensive and analytical picture of conversion than has hitherto been achieved. Whilst I am aware that my thesis has its limits nevertheless I believe that it gives a more comprehensive picture and analysis.

## II. Sources of the materials

The main sources of information came from the Bible, Talmud and Shulchan Aruch in relation to the laws of conversion, as well as explaining the meanings of the various forms of expression with regards to converts and their treatment. Some materials regarding the converts came from the Genizah materials, various books, which were secondary sources but which individually were materially incomplete. I have utilised booklets and many articles and which could be classified as primary sources, as some of these were written either by the persons converting or about them.

## III Methodology

As I was always interested in the lives of the individuals I had to make a decision as to how many shall be included in my Dissertation. I have decided to include at least one person from each century. I first searched through secondary sources to find names of individuals by looking through indexes for “converts” “proselytes” or whatever the German or Hungarian or Russian is the equivalent translation. Those names and sources then led me to more names and details. I have also researched books on Synagogue histories and this is how I found for example Eliza Nathan and was able to relate her story. Having found those names I have then tried to back this up with some primary sources, though their availability was limited. Having examined the background of the individuals I realised that we were dealing with legal, social

and sociological as well as emotional subjects, endeavouring to provide a realistic picture of the individual, his/her environment and background of the society in which the conversion happened. I was fortunate to have found the booklets regarding Eve Cohan, Baron von Mannheim and Josef Steblicki and Valentin Potocki. I have searched through the Genizah materials in Cambridge and also Manchester e.g. those documents mentioned in the Conference Notes of Norman Golb<sup>14</sup>. In respect of research of the Bible and Talmud I used respective printed English, Hungarian or Internet available translations.

#### IV Bibliography

I have used the English transcriptions used in the various books and consulted for Hebrew names, titles and authors and also uses, the transcriptions of the Jewish Encyclopaedia or just simply transliterated the words. Primary and Secondary sources have been identified to the best of my ability.

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<sup>14</sup> Golb Norman, 'The Autograph Memoirs of Obadiah the Proselyte of Oppido Lucano and the Epistle of Barukh B.Isaac of Aleppo Together with Appndx.The Music of Obadiah the Proselyte', paper given at Convegno internazionale di Studi Giovanni-Obadiah da Oppido:proselito,viaggiatore e musicista dell'eta normanna, Oppido Lucano (Basilicata) 28-30 March 2004 2004.

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