

## THE LEGEND OF GER ZEDEK OF WILNO AS POLEMIC AND REASSURANCE\*

by

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Some time in the second half of the eighteenth century, there emerged a Jewish legend that glorified a conversion to Judaism and a martyr's death of a Polish noble from a very prominent Polish aristocratic family, sometimes referred to as Walentyn Potocki, or Graf Potocki—the legend of *ger zedek*, a righteous convert, of Wilno.<sup>1</sup> The story was enthusiastically embraced by Eastern European Jews, and it subsequently became a subject of numerous novels and novellas. Even today its appeal continues. It is currently mentioned on a number of Jewish web sites as “a true story of a Polish *Hrabia* (count) . . . who descended from a long line of noble Christian rulers and who sacrificed wealth and power to convert from Christianity to Judaism,” and it serves as a basis for school plays in some *Haredi* schools for girls.<sup>2</sup> Although converts to Judaism were not unheard of in the premodern era,

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1. According to the definition of a legend used by cultural anthropologists studying folklore, legends, or historical legends, “are prose narratives, which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period less remote, when the world was much as it is today.” William Bascom, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” in *Sacred Narrative*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 9, see also 10–11. On the definition of the legend and its functions, see also, Linda Dégh, *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), especially chapters 1–2. W. Lynwood Montell and Barbara Allen, “Some Characteristics of Historical Legendry: The Narrative and the Narrator,” *Arv [Stockholm]* 37 (1981).

2. A. Litvin “Mayse ger zedek in likht fun legende un virklikhkeit” *Zukunft* [The Future, New York] 31, no. 12 (1926): 704–707; Israel Hayyim Ben-David, *Graf Potozki: o Ger Ha-Zedek: Agadah Dramatit Be-Ḥamesh Mā'arekhot* (Tel Aviv: Snir, 1940); Abraham Karpinowitz, *Di Geshikhthe Fun Vilner Ger Zedek, Graf Valentin Potozki* (Tel Aviv: Vilner Pinkas, 1990); Yehoshua Leiman and Selig Schachnowitz, *Avrohom Ben Avrohom* (Jerusalem, New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1977); Natan Mark, *Ben-Ha-Rozen* (Haifa: Renesans, 1968); E. Z. Portugal and Zvi Yosef Miski, *Shirim, Derzeylungen Fun*

few stories of this kind emerged. Rabbinic authorities had an ambiguous attitude toward non-Jewish conversions, and few encouraged proselytizing or glorified non-Jewish converts. The legend of *ger zedek* of Wilno, though said to be a true story, appears to be a carefully crafted tale of conversion, a polemical and apologetic response to a number of challenges that the Polish Jewish community faced from the mid-eighteenth century.

Two relatively early versions of the tale of *ger zedek* have come down to us: a Hebrew manuscript preserved on microfilm in the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) in Jerusalem, whose exact date is rather difficult to establish,<sup>3</sup> and a Polish translation of another Hebrew manuscript published by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, a well-known Polish intellectual, writer, and historian, in 1840.<sup>4</sup> Kraszewski stated that “having found out about the existence of a manuscript that described all the events [that he had heard from Jews], with great difficulty we have managed to acquire the original, whose translation, apparently a unique Jewish chronicle, we publish here at the end, in all its uniqueness and original naiveté of form and style.”<sup>5</sup> Its physical description provided by Kraszewski does not match that of the JNUL manuscript.<sup>6</sup> The texts differ also in content, although some differences between the Hebrew and Polish versions of the story are related to the fact that the Polish translation was aimed at a Polish audience, whereas the Hebrew ver-

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*Zvi Yosef Miski* (New York: H. Myski, 1981); Saul Saphire, *Der Ger Zedek Fun Vilna: Historisher Roman* (New York, 1942); Selig Schachnowitz, *De Conde Polaco a Judío Observante: la Historia Del Conde Pototski* (Argentina: Editorial Yehuda, n.d.); Moses Seiffert (Zeyfert), *Graf Potozki, Oder, Der Ger Zedek: A Historisher Roman* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), Shalom Zelmanoviz, *Ger-zeydek: Vilner Graf Potozki: Dramatische Legende in 3 Aktn, 8 Bilder* (Kaunas: 1934). The quote comes from “Walentyn Potocki’s story,” a description of Selig Schachnowitz’s book *Avraham ben Avraham*, <http://chelm.freeyellow.com/page17.html>. See also, Berel Wein, “Converts, Apostates and Heroes,” Rabbi Wein.com, <http://www.rabbiwein.com/column-699.html> (originally published in *Jerusalem Post*, January 9, 2004); the Jewish Agency for Israel Web site, “The History of the Jewish People [a timeline],” <http://www.davidsconsultants.com/jewishhistory/history.php?startyear=1740&endyear=1749>. For printed works, see Israel Klausner, *Vilnah, Yerushalayim De-Lita: Dorot Ha-Rishonim 1495–1881* (Tel Aviv: Bet lohme ha-getaot, 1988), 79. Klausner sees the conversion of Walentyn Potocki as a historical fact and cites Kraszewski’s version of the story as evidence. Most recently, see Joseph Prouser, *Noble Soul: The Life and Legend of the Vilna Ger Tzedek Count Potocki* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005). I would like to thank Rachel Manekin of Hebrew University for pointing out that the Potocki plays are still performed in *Haredi* schools.

3. Hebrew manuscript, JNUL, Microfilm F 52930. One of the names mentioned in the text is that of Eliezer Shiskes, who in 1766 was a beadle (*shames*) in one of Vilna’s synagogues. He is mentioned as a young prepubescent boy at the time of the execution of the *ger zedek*, but the text indicates that he was dead at the time. His brother, Shaul Shiskes died at an old age in 1797. I would like to thank Dr. Mordekhai Zalkin from the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev for information on Shiskes and bibliographic references that follow, the following bibliographic reference, Israel Klausner, *Toldot Ha-Kehilah Ha-<sup>2</sup>Ivrit Be-Vilnah*, vol. 1 (Israel, no place: 1968), 135.

4. Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, *Wilno: Od Początków Jego Do Roku 1750* (Wilna: Józef Zawadzki, 1841), 3:173–81. But subsequently, other versions of the story were also published mostly in Yiddish and Hebrew.

5. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 169. In the note, he explained that he bought the manuscript for the price in gold equal to its weight “or even more.” Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 183, n. 7.

6. Kraszewski notes it was a tightly written eight-page Hebrew manuscript, Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 184, n. 13. The JNUL manuscript is nine pages long.

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sions were aimed internally for Jews. The Polish translation, for example, omits the names of the noble families and does not translate the most offensive passages against Catholicism.<sup>7</sup> The discrepancies between the two texts also point to the evolution of the legend in time from the eighteenth century onwards responding to historical developments at a given time.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Legend*

There was a great nobleman, Duke Potocki, who had a gifted son. The nobleman sent his son to Paris to get an education in an academy there, because Paris was a “city full of wise men and writers.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, there was a lesser nobleman, Zaremba, who also had a gifted and intelligent son. Because Zaremba could not afford to send his son to Paris, he sent him to Wilno to study at the “academy” there. This was presumably the famous Jesuit Academy that trained sons of the nobles and affluent townsmen.<sup>10</sup> Zaremba’s gifted son gained respect from some important and affluent noblemen, including Lord Tyszkiewicz, who in turn decided to sponsor Zaremba’s son’s studies in Paris, and who eventually was to become his father-in-law.

The two young men met at the Paris academy and became friends. One day they walked around the city. As they became thirsty, they decided to stop in a small vineyard to get a drink. There they noticed a tent,<sup>11</sup> in which an old Jew was studying the Talmud.<sup>12</sup> The two were intrigued. Not understanding the language, they asked the old man to tell them more about the book. The Jew told them that it was a holy book in a holy language and explained some of the passages he was studying. The two young Polish noblemen liked what they heard and asked whether the teachings represented the truth. The old man responded that they did. They asked why their teacher<sup>13</sup> did not teach them this, to which the old man said, according to the much more elaborate Hebrew text here than the Polish, “you are Christians, and your faith comes from a man leading you astray [*ha-mesiah ʾetkhem ve-hamateh ʾetkhem me-ha-derekh ha-yashar*],”<sup>14</sup> who, the old man continued, issued a

7. The Polish text has “Pot . . .” for Potocki, and “*hetman Tys . . .*” for Tyszkiewicz. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 176. Kraszewski admitted that some editorial deletions were made, Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 183, n. 7.

8. For example, the mention of Russia and the tsar at the end of the tale point to later additions. Legends are by their nature achronological. Montell and Allen, “Some Characteristics,” 78–79.

9. Hebrew *ʾir malʾei hakhamim ve-sofrim*. Polish “miasta pełnego mędrców i pisarzy.” Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 173. France was famous for establishing academies for well-born members of aristocracy to receive education that focused on studies of academic subjects, music, dance, and manners—as well as military training. Perhaps it is these academies that the text refers to, or perhaps it simply refers to Paris as the increasingly important intellectual center, and the word academy is inconsequential. On the education of aristocracy in France and England, see, for example, Patricia-Ann Lee, “Some English Academies: An Experiment in the Education of Renaissance Gentlemen,” *History of Education Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1970).

10. Stanisław Obirek, *Jezuici w Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów 1564–1668* (Cracow: Wyd-  
ział Filozoficzny Towarzystwa Jezusowego, 1996), 77. The word in the Hebrew text is *akademie*.

11. Translated into Polish as *namiot*, and in Hebrew, it is referred to as *sukkah*.

12. Hebrew text: *bavli* and in Polish it is referred only as a book.

13. *Ha-Rav* in the Hebrew text and “rabin” in the Polish text.

14. The Polish text has: “You get your religion from the Pope.” Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 174.

ban [*herem*] prohibiting anyone to teach his son this book, the Talmud.<sup>15</sup> The two young noblemen asked whether he would teach the Talmud to them and offered a lot of money for the lessons.

After they began studying with the Jew, they stopped attending their academy and going to church.<sup>16</sup> Within half a year they learnt the Pentateuch and then the whole Bible [*tanakh*]. Finally, the son of the Duke confided in his friend and said that he was planning to go to Amsterdam and convert to Judaism, “because this faith is true.”<sup>17</sup> His friend seconded, “I will also do that if I have means” to go.<sup>18</sup> So they made a pact [*brit*] that when Zaremba saved money for the journey, he would join his friend in order to convert.

Despite these apparent convictions of the truth of Judaism, some doubts still lingered, and the son of the Duke asked his father for money so that he could go to Rome to study at the Papal academy. He wanted to find out whether he indeed had discovered the truth in Judaism. While in Rome, he organized banquets for the “papal princes” [*sarei popusin?*], and saw that everything revolved around material goods and deceit. One day, he wanted to find out what the pope did in his innermost chamber (*heder ha-ḥadarim*) when he sought to commune with God on a special festival. After bribing a servant, he found out that the pope did not commune with God at all, but that there was a whore waiting for him. She cooked meals for him as well. Disappointed, but happy that God had exposed the lies of the Catholic Church to him, Potocki left for Amsterdam where he converted to Judaism.

Meanwhile, Zaremba returned to Lithuania, forgetting about the pact he had made with Potocki. He married a daughter of the wealthy and influential nobleman Tyszkiewicz, who had sponsored his studies. Right around the time when a son was born to Zaremba, news began to spread that the son of the nobleman Potocki had disappeared after studying in Rome. Zaremba immediately recalled their conversation in Paris and understood that Potocki’s son had gone to Amsterdam and converted to Judaism. Zaremba became depressed because he knew he had broken his promise. So he decided to go to Amsterdam.

Zaremba’s wife and their young son went along, not knowing the purpose of the trip. They first went to Königsberg, a mostly Protestant city in East Prussia, where they “liked the customs of the Prussians because their religion was much better than that of the Lithuanian lords.”<sup>19</sup> They asked for more money from

15. The Polish text only stated that “the Popes strengthened the faith and issued a ban on your nation not to teach your son from this book.” The Polish text implies that the ban was issued against Christians studying the text. But the Hebrew implies that this ban was more general and perhaps refers to the burning of the Talmud and subsequent ban on publishing it in the Papal States. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 174. On the Talmud in early modern Catholic thought, see, for example, Kenneth R. Stow, “The Burning of the Talmud in 1553 in the Light of Sixteenth Century Catholic Attitudes toward the Talmud,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 34 (1972).

16. Hebrew: *bet ha-tiflah*. A traditional expression and pun on *bet ha-tefilah*, house of prayer.

17. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 175. Hebrew JNUL manuscript, p. 3.

18. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 175.

19. The Polish text says “And they liked the customs of the Prussian people because the rural dwellings were much more beautiful than the dwellings of the Lithuanian lords, and a peasant’s home lived in a house as nice as a Lithuanian lord.” Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 177.

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Tyszkiewicz and decided to continue on to Amsterdam. Once there, Zaremba left his wife and converted to Judaism along with his five-year-old son.<sup>20</sup> He and his son were circumcised. The wife looked for them and was shocked when she found out that her husband had become a Jew. But people in Amsterdam told her that conversion to Judaism was permitted there. So she went to her husband and declared that she also wanted to embrace Judaism. He welcomed it but said she needed to learn about the religion more. So she did. She “sent for wise and righteous women [*nashim ḥakhamot ve-zedekot*]”<sup>21</sup> to teach her the Jewish religion. After their coaching, the women sent her to the rabbi who further instructed her in the commandments, and the rewards and punishments, and finally the women took her to the *mikveh*, and “she was made a Jewish woman.”<sup>22</sup>

After her conversion she went back to her husband, but he wanted to marry a Jewish woman, so that, he argued, she could teach him how to observe Jewish law properly. Zaremba suggested to his wife that she should marry a Jewish man for the same reason. But she protested, saying that while they had been living in falsehood they were together, and it was unfair that now that they had found the truth they should be separate. So they stayed together and eventually moved to live in the “Land of Israel.”<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, Potocki decided to go back to Lithuania, after traveling a bit. On this account, the Polish and the Hebrew texts differ slightly. According to the Hebrew text, he had traveled to “the Land of Israel,” then back to Amsterdam, then to German lands, then to Russia, and finally to Lithuania. According to the Polish translation, he went from Amsterdam to Germany, “where he could not stand the customs there because Jews there mixed with gentiles and parroted them.”<sup>24</sup> In Lithuania, he settled in a small town near Wilno, which the Polish text identified as Ilia.<sup>25</sup> There he saw a child in the synagogue who was dancing and screaming, and when the *ger zedek* scolded the child, the boy responded harshly. The *ger zedek* then responded that it was clear that the child would not grow up in the religion of the Jews [*ke-dat mosheh ve-yisra'el*]. He suspected that the child

20. A child can be converted by his father. If there is no father, and the child wants to accept Judaism (alone or with a mother), the conversion has to take place before the rabbinic court. *Shulḥan 'Arukh, Yoreh De'ah, 268:7*.

21. The descriptive adjectives are missing from the Polish text. The Hebrew *nashim ḥakhamot ve-zedekot* seems awkward. More common is *nashim zadkaniot*, instead of *zedekot*, see also even closer, *nashim ḥakhamot zadkaniot*, see, e.g., Midrash Tanḥuma (Warsaw), Parsha Pinḥas, no. 7, or *nashim zadkaniot ve-ḥakhamot*, Midrash Tanḥuma, Parsha Pinḥas, no. 8, available through the Bar Ilan Responsa Project, version 12.

22. *Ve-ne 'aset ivriyah*. This follows rabbinic procedures for converting women. See B. Yevamot 47a–b for the procedures of converting non-Jews to Judaism. On 47b it is stated that one instructs the *ger* for the second time just before the immersion in the ritual bath. For women, she is accompanied by Jewish women to the ritual bath and instructed by learned men standing outside the pool. See also Luria, *Yam shel Shelomoh*, B. Yevamot 4:49; *Tur* and *Shulḥan 'Arukh, Yoreh De'ah, 268:2*.

23. On marriage laws governing converts, see, *Shulḥan 'Arukh, Yoreh De'ah, 269*.

24. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 179.

25. Filip Sulimierski, Bronisław Chlebowski, and Władysław Walewski, *Słownik Geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego I Innych Krajów Słowiańskich* (Warsw: Wydawnictwa Artsytyczne i Filmowe, 1975 [1880]), 3:258–59.

would apostatize. After the father of the child found out about this exchange, he became angry and reported to the local lord that there was a proselyte in town. The lord had the *ger zedek* arrested and sent to Wilno.<sup>26</sup>

In Wilno, the noblemen recognized the arrested man as Duke Potocki's son and tried to convince him to return to Catholicism. *Ger zedek* steadfastly refused. So the noblemen sent for the bishop, who arrived carrying a crucifix. Potocki refused to bow to the crucifix, admitting that he should bow to the lords and the bishops because he was just a lowly Jew in exile, but he could not do so because of the cross.<sup>27</sup> He was tried at the Tribunal as a nobleman and was convicted for apostasy and sentenced to be burned alive. According to the legend, the execution took place on the second day of Shavuot, according to the Hebrew text, in 1749, and, according to the Polish translation in 1719. Potocki, having had his tongue ripped out was burned at the stake, and his ashes were scattered in the air.

On the day of the execution, Jews were forced to stay in their homes, but one young man, Eliezer Shiskes, "who had not yet signs of beard," sneaked to the place of execution, and through bribery managed to obtain some ashes of the "holy and pure body," and, according to the Hebrew manuscript, one finger, or, according to the Polish translation, "the blood of the holy and [most] faithful [*ger zedek*]."<sup>28</sup>

After the execution, the story continues, God took vengeance on the Christians. Those who had delivered wood for the stake had "their houses burnt down to the ground."<sup>29</sup> According to the Polish text, a Christian woman who laughed when the *ger's* tongue was being cut became dumb. Just after the execution, a letter came from the King or the Tsar that was to prevent the execution.<sup>30</sup> The tale ends with an assertion that the *ger zedek* was received in heavens by angels, by Abraham and other righteous people [*ha-zaddikim*]. It concludes with a hope for redemption and the coming of the Messiah. The publisher of the Polish translation, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, noted that the Jews commemorated the anniversary of the convert's death on the second day of Shavuot.<sup>31</sup>

### *Converts in Jewish Tradition*

In contrast to Christians who viewed Jewish conversions to Christianity in triumphalist terms as proofs of the verity of their religion, in the premodern period, Jewish religious and communal leaders took a very ambiguous, and sometimes even outright negative, position toward non-Jewish converts to Judaism, only rarely expressing a sense of triumph in such cases. The Babylonian Talmud provides both negative and positive models of how one should treat proselytes. While

26. Hebrew MS, JNUL, Microfilm F 52930, 7 (unnumbered); Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 179.

27. Hebrew MS, JNUL, Microfilm F 52930, 8 (unnumbered); Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 180.

28. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 181. Hebrew MS, JNUL, Microfilm F 52930, 9 (unnumbered).

29. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 181. Hebrew MS, JNUL, Microfilm F 52930, 9 (last page).

30. It is found only in the Hebrew text, *koser*. In the Polish text it only states that a letter came by mail. This probably would point us to a postpartition date, because traditionally, the Polish king was referred to as *melekh* in Hebrew texts.

31. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 169. On Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, see *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (Wrocław, Warsaw, Cracow: Zakład Narodowy Ossolińskich, 1970), 15:221–29.

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some authorities embraced converts to Judaism, citing the biblical Ruth, a Moabite woman who became an ancestress of King David, others expressed strong reservations about them.<sup>32</sup> The most prominent example of the negative view is that of Rabbi Halbo that “proselytes are hard for Israel like a scab on the skin.”<sup>33</sup> Rabbis tended to regard converts whose conversion was motivated by ulterior motives, such as a desire to marry someone Jewish, or to advance their career, with suspicion. In a similar vein, some authorities argued that during the messianic era, when Israel would be prosperous, converts to Judaism would not be accepted because at that point, one would not be able to assert that the conversion is sincere.<sup>34</sup> To ensure that conversion to Judaism would be sincere for its own sake and not for any earthly benefit, rabbis instituted elaborate procedures, which included scrutinizing potential converts’ motives, advising them that Jews were persecuted and downtrodden, and instructing them in the commandments that Jews must observe and in rewards and punishments. If the candidates were not discouraged, the whole process was culminated by a ritual immersion for women or circumcision followed by immersion for men. During the immersion, further instruction was to take place. At the end, a convert was to be regarded “as Israel in all respects.”<sup>35</sup>

Still, converts to Judaism, the *gerim*, even those converted out of sincerity, were not always granted the same status as Jews born to Jewish parents, retaining, in some aspects of Jewish life, a hue of being an outsider.<sup>36</sup> Rabbinic authorities debated whether or not converts could say blessings that contained the phrase “God of our fathers,” “our fathers” posing the problem. Consequently, the rabbis also expressed reservations about allowing converts to be leaders of prayers in synagogues, during which that phrase was used. Similar reservations were raised concerning the morning prayer said daily by Jewish males in which they thank God, among other things, for not being made non-Jews (*she lo’ asani goy*). Were con-

32. For the references to Ruth, see B. Yevamot 47b. For other positive examples of proselytes, see B. Avodah Zarah 11a.

33. R. Halbo’s statement is to be found in B. Yevamot 47b. This section of the Talmud also heavily relies on Ruth chapter I to highlight the value of true proselytes. Halbo’s statement is widely repeated both in the Talmud and the post-Talmudic rabbinic literature dealing with conversions, e.g., B. Yevamot 109b, B. Niddah 13b; Joseph Caro, *Beit Yosef Yoreh De’ah*, 268:2. “Turei Zahav” and “Siftei Cohen” on *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah*, 268:2. Halbo’s statement is based on his interpretation of a combination of two biblical verses: Leviticus 13:2 and Isaiah 14:1.

34. B. Yevamot 24b and B. Avodah Zarah 3b. See also, *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah*, 268:12.

35. B. Yevamot 47a–b. On the development of conversion procedures, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), chap. 7.

36. See, for example, B. Kiddushin 70b for a discussion on the relationship between God and Israel and God and the converts. M. Yevamot 8:2 allows a Jewish man with an injured penis to marry a convert or a freed slave but not a Jewish woman. See also, the discussion in B. Yevamot 76a–b on the marriage and acceptance of the converts into the congregation of Israel. I am indebted to Dr. Rami Reiner of Ben Gurion University for pointing me to the following rabbinic sources concerning a different status of the converts: M. Bikkurim 1:4; contrasting view in Y. Bikkurim 1:4 (64a). Maimonides rejected the Mishnah and followed Talmud Yerushalmi allowing the convert, Obadiah, to say all blessings, see Maimonides, Responsa no. 283 (Bar Ilan Responsa Project, 12). See also Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, chap. 10.

verts allowed to say that, some rabbinic authorities questioned, since, after all, they were born non-Jews?<sup>37</sup>

In Christian lands, Jews increasingly perceived gentile conversions to Judaism as a potential threat to their communal security. The medieval rabbinic authority, Rashi, explaining Rabbi Halbo's statement, stated that proselytes were not familiar with commandments, and brought on "calamities."<sup>38</sup> In early modern Poland, Jewish leaders seem to have followed this negative stance, although some still acknowledged the existing ambivalence of rabbinic attitudes toward converts.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the most famous pronouncement by a Polish rabbi against converts to Judaism, one that underlines the vulnerability of the Jewish community accepting proselytes, is that by Solomon Luria, a sixteenth-century Polish rabbinic authority, in his halakhic compendium *Yam shel Shelomoh*. Luria stated that while earlier Jews had once had authority on their own to accept proselytes, even when they were under Roman rule, "now, we are not in a land of our own and are like slaves under the hands of our lords, and should any one accept him [a proselyte] he is a rebel responsible for his own life."<sup>40</sup> Luria then proceeded to warn against engaging in such an activity. His sharply negative attitude toward accepting converts to Judaism has been generally attributed to the apparent repercussions that Polish Jewish communities faced as a result of a wave of converts in Poland in 1539–40.<sup>41</sup>

Still conversions to Judaism continued in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth beyond the sixteenth century, and Jewish communal leaders likewise continued to be wary of proselytizing. In 1644, the *Va'ad Medinat Lita* (the Council of Lithuania) forbade the acceptance of converts, indicating that the community was liable for expenses related to rescuing Jews accused of proselytizing and to protecting the communities from the consequences of violating Christian law against proselytism and Christian apostasy. The ordinance ordered punishments for anyone who engaged in such activity and was repeated in 1647.<sup>42</sup>

In the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, too, Christian law that prohibited apostasy from Christianity and punished it by death was in part to blame for this increasingly negative attitude toward *gerim*. The law applied not only to apostates but also to those who proselytized or who knowingly accepted such proselytes.<sup>43</sup> The noted sixteenth-century rabbinic authority, Moses Isserles of Cracow, the

37. On the question of cantors, see, e.g., *Shulhan 'Arukh*, Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 53:19, and "Turei Zahav." On the morning prayer see, *Tur* Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 46:4; Joseph Caro, *Beit Yosef*, ad loc.; Yoel Sirkes in *Beit Hadash*, ad loc. Also, *Shulhan 'Arukh*, Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 46.4, and "Turei Zahav," ad loc. For a discussion of some of these issues, see Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 324–36.

38. Rashi on B. Niddah 13b. See also Rashi on B. Yevamot 47b, and on B. Kiddushin 70b. See also Tosafot on B. Kiddushin 70b.

39. See, e.g., Isserles on *Shulhan 'Arukh*, Oraḥ Ḥayyim, 46:4, and "Turei Zahav," ad loc.

40. Shlomoh Luria, *Yam Shel Shelomoh*, B. Yevamot 4:49.

41. Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 144–45.

42. Takkanah 410, Simon Dubnow, *Pinkas Va'ad Ha-Medinah* (Berlin: 'Ayanot, 1925). See also a takkanah of the community of Łęczna in 1681, which deals with a similar issue of expenses related to, among other things, proselytizing. Dubnow, *Pinkas Va'ad Ha-Medinah*, 285.

43. Apostasy from Catholicism was punishable by death according to two sets of law in use in



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Rema, acknowledged the existence of such law in his commentary on the *Shulḥan ʿArukh, Yoreh Deʿah*, 267:4, which discussed the requirement to circumcise a slave if he was to stay in a Jewish home. Isserles wrote: “In these lands [Poland] where it is forbidden to convert non-Jews [*shum ʿoved kokhavim*],” it was not necessary to circumcise a non-Jewish male servant, and one was allowed to keep “the uncircumcised” at home as long as he himself wanted to stay.

### *Real Converts without Legends*

Despite harsh laws punishing Christian apostates and the Jewish leadership’s reluctance to accept them, Polish Jewish history in the premodern period does not lack evidence of actual converts to Judaism, some of whom died in spectacular acts of martyrdom. Yet, before the second half of the eighteenth century, no tales of glorifying such Christian converts to Judaism emerged in Poland.

Students of east European Jewry are familiar with the case of Katarzyna Wejgłowa, who was burned at the stake in 1539 in Cracow for “falling into perfidious and superstitious Jewish sect” (*in perfidam et superstitiosam sectam judaicam sit collapsa*).<sup>44</sup> Although subsequently Protestants embraced Katarzyna as an early Protestant martyr, or a proto-anti-Trinitarian in Poland, Jews or Jewish historians never claimed her as their martyr; at best she was seen as one of the sixteenth-century “judaizers,” Christians flirting with ideas found in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), but never a Jewish martyr. In fact, despite assertions by contemporary chroniclers that she indeed accepted Judaism, historians—especially Jewish historians—have tended to discount her case as part of broader, and in their minds baseless, accusations that had surfaced at the time that Jews proselytized among Christians.<sup>45</sup> Shmuel Ettinger, for example, called the al-

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Poland. The laws passed initially against the Polish Anti-Trinitarians in 1658 and subsequently widened to include any non-Catholic religion, including Judaism, subjected apostates to death penalty [*na gardle ma być karany*]. Stanisław Konarski, ed., *Volumina Legum: Przedruk Zbioru Praw Staraniem XX. Pijarów W Warszawie Od Roku 1732 Do Roku <1793> Wydanego*, 2nd ed., 10 vols. (Petersburg: Nakł. i drukiem Jozafata Ohryzki, 1859; reprinted 1989), 4:238–39, 5:355. Also the Magdeburg law prevalent in Polish towns subjected apostates to death penalty, Bartłomiej Groicki, *Porządek Sądów i Spraw Miejskich Prawa Majdeburckiego W Koronie Polskiej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Prawnicze, 1953), 199. On the rabbinic reservations to accept back repenting Jews who had converted to Christianity, see Edward Fram, “Perception and Reception of Repentant Apostates in Medieval Ashkenaz and Premodern Poland,” *AJS Review* 21, no. 2 (1996).

44. MS Acta episcopalia 18 (1538–40) in Archiwum Kurii Metropolitalnej (Cracow), fol. 88v–92v. The notice of her execution on Saturday 19 April 1539 appears in the same volume, fol. 96v, as well as in MS Acta officialia 62 in Archiwum Kurii Metropolitalnej (Cracow), 645–6.

45. Janusz Tazbir, *A State without Stakes: Polish Religious Toleration in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973), 47. Majer Bałaban, *Historja Żydów W Krakowie i Na Kazimierzu: 1304–1868*, 2 vols. (Cracow: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1991), 1:125–27. Sources concerning the 1540s allegations of Jewish proselytism see, E. Zivier “Jüche Bekehrungsversuche im 16. Jahrhundert” in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Juden* (Leipzig, 1916), 96–113. Historian, Waclaw Sobieski, saw Wejgłowa as the first Polish Anti-Trinitarian/Arian, Waclaw Sobieski, “Modlitewnik Arjanki,” *Reformacja w Polsce* 1, no. 1 (1921): 58. For an example of Protestant appropriation of Wejgłowa’s martyrdom, see Wojciech Węgierski, *Kronika Zboru Ewan-gelickiego Krakowskiego* (Cracow: 1651 [1817]), 3–4.

legations that Jews sought proselytes, whom they circumcised and sent to Lithuania in 1530s and 1540s as *‘alilat ha-gerim*, a proselyte libel.<sup>46</sup>

But there were other cases of Christian conversions as well. In addition to the ordinances of the Council of Lithuania in the 1640s, there is evidence from Christian court records illustrating the existence of such cases. In the late 1650s and 1660s, a local priest from the town of Sluck in the eastern territories of Poland-Lithuania, now in Belarus, filed several complaints that Jews who had previously converted to Christianity arrived in Sluck to return to Judaism.<sup>47</sup> From the Christian perspective, apostasy from Christianity to Judaism could also include Jews who had been converted to Christianity and relapsed. In these instances, as Edward Fram has shown, receiving such repenting Jewish converts to Christianity back into the Jewish community posed a danger similar to that of proselytism and, therefore, also resulted in the communal leaders' reluctance to accept them back.<sup>48</sup> The Sluck case shows both the repenting Jews and, indirectly, other Christian converts to Judaism as well. The priest mentioned, for example, a number of relapsed Jewish converts, and discussed a case of a Jewish woman who returned to Judaism with "her Muscovite husband" and his family. It appears that the woman had converted to Christianity, married "a Muscovite" man, had children, and then all of them including, as it is implied, other members of his family arrived in Sluck to join the Jewish community. Although the children would have been considered Jewish according to Jewish law, because their mother was Jewish, his status and that of his family would have required conversion to Judaism to be included in the Jewish community.<sup>49</sup>

In 1716, Maryna Wojciechówna (her name indicates that she was unmarried and was a daughter of a certain Wojciech), was arrested for apostasy at a Jewish wedding in the Ukrainian town of Dubno, at which she was the bride.<sup>50</sup> During her trial, she confessed that she had come from Mielec, now a small town in southeastern Poland, where she had served for three years as a maid in the house of a certain Jew. She then moved to a nearby town, Leżajsk, where, according to her testimony, she was persuaded to convert to Judaism by some local Jewish men and women. During her trial, Maryna Wojciechówna was tortured and reverted to Christianity. In doing so, she expressed her "disgust with the Jewish religion" and her willingness to die for Christ. Because she repented, she was spared being burned alive and was sentenced to death by beheading. Her body was burned af-

46. Shmuel Ettinger, "Ma'amadam Ha-Mishpati Ve-Ha-Hevrat Shel Yehudei Ukraina Ba-Me'ot Ha-15–17," *Zion* 20 (1955): 131. Interestingly, in another article, he accepted Jewish influences on Russian fifteenth-century Judaizers, also a topic of scholarly controversy. Shmuel Ettinger, "Ha-Hashpa'ah Ha-Yehudit 'al Ha-Tesisah Ha-Datit Ba-Mizrah Shel Eiropan Ba-Sof Ha-Me'ah Ha-15," in *Sefer Yovel Le-Yitzhak Baer*, ed. Shmuel Ettinger (Jerusalem: Ha-Hevrah ha-historit ha-israelit, 1960).

47. *Arkheograficheski sbornik dokumentov otnosiashchikhsia k istorii severo-zapadnoi Rusi* (Vilna, 1870), 7:112–13 and 142–43.

48. Fram, "Perception and Reception of Repentant Apostates."

49. *Arkheograficheski sbornik dokumentov otnosiashchikhsia k istorii severo-zapadnoi Rusi*, 7:142–43.

50. *Arkhib Iugo-Zapadnoi Rossii*, ed. Komissiiia dlia razbora drevnikh aktov (Kiev: 1859–), 1/5: 268–70.

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terwards. Jews involved in the wedding were also tried on the account of proselytism, but, to their defense, they claimed their ignorance of the fact that the woman was in fact a former Christian and were acquitted. But the fact that they needed to defend themselves highlights the continuous vulnerability and danger associated with accepting proselytes.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, another woman, Maryna Dawidowa of Vitebsk, a town in the eastern territories of present-day Belarus, was also tried and convicted of apostasy in Dubno. Unlike Wojciechówna, Dawidowa did not recant her beliefs and died a martyr's death.<sup>52</sup> According to records of the trial, after the death of her husband, Dawid Syrowajec, Maryna Dawidowa decided to "accept the Jewish faith." A formal conversion is never mentioned in the extant records. Having made this decision, she left her native Vitebsk on a horse, and about 50 miles away from her home town, so the court record states, she began to introduce herself as a Jewish woman. As she testified during her trial, she had received help from Jews until she reached the town of Dubno. In Dubno, she was arrested for apostasy, but it is not known who denounced her. She was asked whether she was willing to return to the Christian faith, but she steadfastly refused, stating "I do not want [to return to the Christian faith] and I am ready to die in the Jewish religion for the living God, because it is a better religion than your Christian religion, because your religion is false."<sup>53</sup> She was tortured but maintained her stance. This defiance brought a cruel death sentence. She was burned alive at the stake after having had three pieces of her body ripped off, presumably as a symbol of the Trinity.

A multilayered case of Abram Michelevich, a Jew from Mohilev, and his Christian partner, Paraska Daniłowna, tried and executed in Mohilev in 1748, is yet another example of Christian conversions to Judaism in premodern Poland. The list of charges ranged from infanticide (they abandoned their newborn child) and adultery (as a relationship between a Jew and a Christian was regarded) to Paraska's charge of apostasy and Abram's of proselytizing.<sup>54</sup>

But, it was a 1753 case in Wilno that may have provided material for the *ger żedek* legend. On May 29, 1753, the Lithuanian Tribunal condemned to death by burning a Croat man, Rafał Sentimani, for having converted from Catholicism to Judaism.<sup>55</sup> According to the decree, Sentimani, born of Catholic parents and educated in Catholic religion, began having doubts at the age of 12, and eventually "dared to invalidate what the Christian world values as priceless, [i.e.,] the holy baptism, by performing a disgusting ceremony according to Jewish rites," likely a

51. *Arkhiv Iugo-Zapadnoi Rossii*, 1/5:270.

52. *Arkhiv Iugo-Zapadnoi Rossii*, 1/5:267–69.

53. *Arkhiv Iugo-Zapadnoi Rossii*, 1/5:270.

54. *Istoriko-Iuridicheskie Materialy Iz Aktov Knug Gubernii Vitebskoi i Mogilevskoi Khraniashchikhsia V Tsentralnom Arkhive V Vitebske i Izdannye Pod Redaktsieiu Arkhivariusa Sego Arkhiva Sozonova*, ed. Sozonov, 32 vols. (Vitebsk: 1884), 15:229–38. See also Magda Teter, *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Beleaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 4.

55. The document is published in Adam Kaźmierczyk, ed., *Żydzi Polscy 1648–1772: Źródła*, vol. 6, *Studia Judaica Cracoviensia* (Cracow: Uniwersytet Jagielloński Katedra Judaistyki, 2001), 187–89.

reference to the circumcision.<sup>56</sup> He took the name Abraham Izakowicz and wandered around until he reached the small town of Ilia, near Wilno, where he was apprehended. He was then examined by secular and religious authorities but refused to return to Catholicism and was therefore sentenced to death by being burned alive, “so that,” as the decree states, “infectious desire [*pestilential fames*] contaminating the faithful in the Catholic kingdom, may not go unpunished according to the rigor of the laws.”<sup>57</sup> The execution was to be performed outside of town on June 2, 1753. Before burning, Sentimani’s tongue, “which had uttered blasphemies,”<sup>58</sup> was to be ripped out by the executioner and his ashes were to be shot into the air through a mortar.<sup>59</sup>

Sentimani’s case resembles the *ger zedek* legend. As in the Polish translation of the legend, so here the convert was apprehended in the town of Ilia. Also, in both texts, the tongue of the convert was ripped out, but in the legend this act was accompanied by God’s punishment of those who laughed when this happened. His name, however, is different, as is his social status, and the date of his death, which according to the legend was to take place on Shavuot 1749 (or 1719), not in 1753. In 1749, Shavuot fell on May 23–24, and in 1753, on June 7–8, not on June 2. Still, the timing of Sentimani’s execution was close enough to Shavuot that year to allow for a conflation of the dates of the festival and the execution. Moreover, it actually fell on Saturday, the Shabbat.

The question still remains as to why this case found its way to the Jewish lore but not the other true stories, such as those of Katarzyna Wejglowa and Maryna Dawidowa, which, instead, inspired a negative reaction, like that of Solomon Luria, or have been passed over in silence by contemporaries or later scholars. While the gender of these earlier converts may have played a role, the timing in the second half of the eighteenth century appears to be an important factor as well. In the second half of the eighteenth century, things began to change in Poland among both Christians and Jews. In 1768, on pressure from Russia, Prussia, Denmark, England, and Sweden, Polish Christian law repealed the death penalty for apostasy.<sup>60</sup> But the legend seems to be more than a reaction to the change in law. It appears to be a response to a number of challenges the Jewish community faced at the time, and polemical elements within that story highlight just that.

56. Kaźmierczyk, *Żydzi Polscy*, 187.

57. Kaźmierczyk, *Żydzi Polscy*, 188.

58. Kaźmierczyk, *Żydzi Polscy*, 188.

59. The cutting of a tongue in case of trials of heretics was not uncommon in premodern Europe; see, for example, the trial of Michael Sattler, an Anabaptist put on trial in 1527, Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 180–83.

60. For laws concerning the non-Catholic Christians promulgated at the 1768 Sejm, see Konarski, *Volumina Legum*, 7:256–74. Article I, § III deals with the repeal of the death penalty and sets expulsion as the punishment for apostasy: “Cum religionem Romanam Catholicam in Polonia dominantem, Iuribus Cardinalibus annumeremus, transitum ab Ecclesia Romana ad aliam quamcunque religionem in hoc Poloniae Regno, Magno Ducatu Lit. et in annexis Provinciis cirminale delictum declaramus. Qui itaque futuris temporibus transpire ausus fuerit, exul Dominiis Reipublicae esto,” Konarski, *Volumina Legum*, 7:257.

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### *The Story of Reassurance*

Folklorists regard legends as a “human reaction to threatening conditions, as ‘fear and overcoming fear’ . . . as a collective response to social ambiguities.”<sup>61</sup> Linda Dégh has argued that legends are dialectic and “can make sense only within the cross fire of controversies.”<sup>62</sup> She sees them as “products of conflicting opinions” that provide answers to controversies during which they emerge.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, their function is to “confirm or question a momentarily valid conception of the world.”<sup>64</sup> Folk legends, which become part of collective memory, are fluid, and they respond to the challenges of the present. Patrick Geary argued that historical tales and memories are “made meaningful and connected to the present.”<sup>65</sup> What was transmitted had a function: it created a past; that past needed to be useful, and what was not useful was discarded.<sup>66</sup> Orally transmitted stories, like medieval manuscripts, could not have survived without being actively preserved by those who found them appealing and useful.

Among Christians, typical tales of conversion and martyrdom were often constructed and used at times of crisis. From the earliest days of Christianity, stories of martyrs for Christianity sought to reassure Christian listeners of its validity, when their faith was challenged. These stories usually emphasized the martyrs’ strong commitment to their faith, and discussed miracles that followed after their deaths. Christian stories of Jewish conversions to Christianity served a similar purpose and were very popular in Christian homiletic and polemical works. After the Reformation, for example, tales of Jewish conversions to Catholicism became prominent, for they showed that the Jews, “blind” for so long, in the end nonetheless chose Catholicism over Protestant “heresy.”<sup>67</sup> The same was true for Protestant conversion tales. The goal behind these tales was to reassure the listeners of the validity and veracity of their own religion.

In Jewish tradition, primarily the tales of Jewish martyrdom served the purpose of reassurance. There were the ten sages whose deaths as martyrs during Hadrian’s rule have been memorialized in the Midrash *ʿAsarah Harugei Malkhut*. The Babylonian Talmud tells of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion who died a martyr’s death for occupying himself with the Torah,<sup>68</sup> of 400 young martyrs who chose to

61. Dégh, *Legend and Belief*, 24.

62. Dégh, *Legend and Belief*, 2.

63. Dégh, *Legend and Belief*, 2–3, 38.

64. Rudolf Schenda, Hans ten Doornkaat, and Erika Keller, *Sagenerzähler Und Sagensammler Der Schweiz: Studien Zur Produktion Volkstümlicher Geschichte Und Geschichten Vom 16. Bis Zum Frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Bern; Stuttgart: Haupt, 1988), 12, quoted in Dégh, *Legend and Belief*, 46.

65. Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 19, see also 165.

66. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, 165–66, see also 177, 179–80.

67. On this see, for example, Kenneth R. Stow, “Church, Conversion and Tradition: The Problem of Jews Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Italy,” *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica: rivista del Dipartimento di studii storici dal Medioevo all’età conemporanea dell’Università “La Sapienza” di Roma* 2 (1996); Magdalena Teter, “Jewish Conversions to Catholicism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Jewish History* 17, no. 3 (2003).

68. B. Avodah Zarah end of 17b–18a.

drown rather than profess idolatry, and of a mother and her seven sons who were slaughtered for refusing to serve idols [*peleh le-<sup>2</sup>avodah zarah*].<sup>69</sup> In Europe, most renowned are the powerful chronicles of the Crusades and elements of martyrdom in the chronicles of the 1648 massacres in Ukraine.<sup>70</sup> But to my knowledge, stories of righteous converts in Jewish sources, whose purpose was to provide comfort and serve as a polemic against another religion in a way similar to the above-mentioned stories of Jewish martyrdom, or of Jewish conversions in Christian hagiography and homiletics are few and far between, scattered in the vast rabbinic literature.

In the Babylonian Talmud, there is the story of conversion of Onkelos, who in one version is said to have been the nephew of Emperor Titus.<sup>71</sup> In later Jewish sources one can also find some references to righteous converts, but they are generally not very prominent. For example, in the Hebrew chronicles of the Crusades, there is a story of the martyrdom of Yaakov bar Sullam, described briefly as someone who “did not come from a prominent family and whose mother was not Jewish.”<sup>72</sup> The medieval *Sefer Hasidim* encourages the acceptance of sincere converts to Judaism, but even here, the text is devoid of any sense of need for assurance or apologia in admitting, or encouraging others to admit, converts to Judaism into the Jewish community.<sup>73</sup> Of the medieval works, the *Sefer Nizahon Yashan* (also known as *Nizahon Vetus*) might be exceptional in that it uses a story of an emperor testing the faith of a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim by asking each of them to convert to either of the two remaining religions or face death. In this tale, the Jew remained steadfast in his commitment to Judaism, the Christian vilified Islam and converted to Judaism, while the Muslim criticized Christianity and also embraced

69. Both stories in B. Gittin 57b.

70. It is unclear how widely disseminated the Hebrew chronicles were before they were published in the nineteenth century, but the chronicles of 1648–49 were published still in the seventeenth century, a few years after the massacres. For example, the most famous, *Yeven Mezulah* by Nathan Nata Hanover, was published in 1653 and republished in 1727; and *Zok ha'ittim* by Meir ben Shmuel of Szczepreszyn was published in 1650 and then in 1656. For the discussion of the Hebrew chronicles of the first crusades, see Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). For the texts of the Hebrew chronicles of the Crusades, see Abraham Meir Habermann, ed., *Sefer Gezerot Ashkenaz Ve-Zarfut: Divre Zikhronot Mi-Bene Ha-Dorot Shebi-Tekufat Mas'ei Ha-Zelav U-Mivhar Piyutehem* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1945). For the Hebrew chronicles and poetry of the 1648 massacres, see Hayyim Jonah Gurland, *Le-Korot Ha-Gezerot 'al Yisra'el* (Przemyśl: 1887). For a discussion of the question of martyrdom in Ashkenaz, see Jacob Katz, “Ben Tat-Nu Le-Tah-Tat,” in *Halakhah Ve-Kabalah: Mehkarim Be-Toldot Dat Yisra'el 'Al Medoreha Ve-Zikatah Ha-Hevratit* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984). See also: Edward Fram, “Ben 1096 Ve 1648–49- 'Iyun Me-Hadash,” *Zion* 61, no. 2 (1996); Edward Fram, “Ve-<sup>2</sup>Adayin En Ben 1096 Le-1648–49,” *Zion* 62, no. 1 (1997).

71. On Onkelos see, B. Gittin 56b, and B. Avodah Zarah 11a. For the English translation of a version from the *Mayseh bukh* see, Moses Gaster, *Ma'aseh Book: Book of Jewish Tales and Legends* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

72. Habermann, ed., *Sefer Gezerot Ashkenaz Ve-Zarfut*, 35.

73. *Sefer Hasidim* in some cases encourages Jews to accept and to love them, see especially nos. 116, 377. Samuel Ha-Hasid Judah ben and Reuben Margulies, *Sefer Hasidim* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1957), 141.

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Judaism. In the end, convinced of the veracity of Judaism, the emperor also converted to Judaism.<sup>74</sup> This story resembles another medieval polemical work—Judah ha-Levi's *The Kuzari*, in which a Khazar king, on discussing religion with a philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew, embraces Judaism.<sup>75</sup>

One of the popular early modern works, *The Mayseh Bukh*, first published in 1602, also contains some tales of converts from the Talmud and Midrashim, including the story of Onkelos, and retells other tales of medieval origin. In one of these tales, a wicked bishop converted to Judaism. The bishop tried to kill Judah the Pious, one of the authors of the *Sefer Hasidim*, and was subsequently punished by miracles that led to his conversion to Judaism. In some of these stories, non-Jews convert because they want something: to marry a beautiful Jewish woman, to partake in the Passover Seder,<sup>76</sup> or to repent for evil deeds that they did or intended to do against Jews. There is also a story of a Jewish pope, who had been kidnapped as a child by his Christian wet nurse, baptized, and subsequently became a pope, only to return to Judaism on learning the truth about his identity.<sup>77</sup> With the exception of the Jewish pope story, none of the convert stories in the *Mayseh Bukh* convey a strong affirmation of Judaism that is coupled with an overt rejection of another religion, be it paganism or Christianity.

The legend of *ger zedek* of Wilno, therefore, differs from earlier Jewish conversion stories. Not only is a convert to Judaism a central focus of the tale, but the tale also resembles a typical Christian tale of conversion/martyrdom ending with reassurance, miracles, and even an appreciation for relics—the *ger zedek*'s ashes, his finger, and even blood. Yet, in this legend, the typical actors found in a Christian tale are reversed. It is *not* a Jew who converts to Christianity through either reasoning or a miracle, but it is three adult Catholics and one child who convert to Judaism, one of whom dies a martyr's death.<sup>78</sup> These Catholics are no ordinary Catholics; they are all members of the nobility: a son of a Duke, his friend, and his wife—herself the daughter of a prominent nobleman—along with their five-year-old son. The symbolism of the powerful and privileged Catholics converting to the religion of the “lowliest of the people,” as Jews often described themselves, is stark, and it only underlines the careful construction of this conversion narrative.

The effectiveness of Christian tales of Jewish conversions to Catholicism as tales of reassurance was weakened by the fact that a converting Jew potentially stood to gain after conversion to the dominant religion. This fact was recognized by Christians, the Church, and the state, which often provided financial support

74. David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 216–19 (English), 151–53 (Hebrew), no. 227.

75. Judah Ha-Levi, *The Kuzari (Kitab Al Khazari): An Argument for the Faith of Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

76. Prohibition of non-Jewish participation at the Passover Seder stems from Exodus 12:43.

77. Gaster, *Ma'aseh Book*, 368–75, 410–18. On the Jewish pope legend see, David Lerner, “The Enduring Legend of the Jewish Pope,” *Judaism* 40, no. 2 (1991) and Joseph Sherman, *The Jewish Pope: Myth, Diaspora and Yiddish Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003).

78. For a discussion of such tales in early modern Poland, see Teter, “Jewish Conversions to Catholicism,” 267–69.

for Jews converting to Christianity.<sup>79</sup> However, such financial benefits often increased Christians' distrust of Jews embracing Christianity and impeded their absorption into the Christian society. Jews acknowledge this as well. The anonymous medieval author of the polemical work *Sefer Nizahon Yashan* wrote:

With regard to their questioning us as to whether there are proselytes among us, they ask this question to their shame and to the shame of their faith. After all, one should not be surprised at the bad deeds of an evil Jew who becomes an apostate, because his motives are to enable himself to eat all that his heart desires, to give pleasure to his flesh with wine and fornication, to remove from himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven so that he should fear nothing, to free himself from all the commandments, cleave to sin, and concern himself with worldly pleasures.<sup>80</sup>

However, Christians converting to Judaism, the medieval polemicists asserted, could only lose:

But the situation is different with regard to proselytes who converted to Judaism and thus went of their own free will from freedom to slavery, from light to darkness. If the proselyte is a man, then he knows that he must wound himself by removing his foreskin through circumcision, that he must exile himself from place to place, that he must deprive himself of worldly good, and fear for his life from the external threat of being killed by the uncircumcised, and that he will lack many things that his heart desires; similarly, a woman proselyte also separates herself from all pleasures. And despite all this, they come to take refuge under the wing of the divine presence. It is evident that they would not do this unless they knew for certain that their faith is without foundation and that it is all a lie, vanity, and emptiness. Consequently, you should be ashamed when you mention the matter of proselytes.<sup>81</sup>

In the legend the *ger zedek*, the righteous convert, son of a duke, Potocki, openly acknowledged his decline in status when he stated that he was a Jewish man dwelling in the exile or, in the Polish text, “a Jew, a lowly, downtrodden man in a bitter exile” who should give respect to the Polish noblemen.<sup>82</sup> A nobleman's con-

79. Polish Bishop Kobielski, following earlier Christian writers and leaders, wrote about converts to Catholicism in his diocese of Luck-Brest in 1749: “But almost all require support [*suffragio*] and alms and should be assisted and provided for [during their] life by me and other benefactors, so that they may not return to their vomit [*ne ad vomitum redeant*].” MS. 464 Luceoriensis in Archivio Segreto Vaticano, S. Congregationis Relationes Status ad Limina. Also in *Relationes Status Dioecesium in Magno Ducatu Lithuaniae* (Rome: 1978), 2:155.

80. Berger, *Nizahon Vetus*, 206–7 (English), 144–45 (Hebrew), no. 211.

81. Berger, *Nizahon Vetus*, 206–7 (English), 144–45 (Hebrew), no. 211.

82. In Polish “mizerny, nizki, pohańbiony.” The language used here seems to be a formulaic Polish expression used by Jews. See, for example, Bohdan Baranowski, *Instrukcje Gospodarze Dla Dóbr Magnackich i Szlacheckich Z XVII-XIX Wieku* (Wrocław: Zakład im. Ossolińskich, 1958–). I would like to thank Gershon Hundert of McGill University in Montreal, Canada, for pointing this parallel to me and referring me to this source.



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version to Judaism would have meant not only relinquishing his aristocratic privileges but also, according to the laws in Poland, losing his life.<sup>83</sup> This stood in stark contrast with the possibility that—according to the third Lithuanian statute passed in 1588 and applied from then on in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—“if a Jew or a Jewess accept Christian Faith, then they and their offspring should be considered nobles.”<sup>84</sup> A nobleman’s conversion to Judaism, therefore, could not have been opportunistic; it had to be sincere, and a tale presenting such a narrative was guaranteed to be effective.<sup>85</sup>

The story’s careful narrative of proving the validity of Judaism was further amplified by placing the time of *ger zedek*’s martyrdom on Shavuot, a holiday of the revelation of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, and the tale’s repeated references to the sanctity of the Torah.<sup>86</sup> But, the festival of Shavuot is also considered a festival of converts to Judaism. During the festival, the portions related to the revelation of the Torah on Sinai (Exodus 19:1–20:26) and, on the second day, the Book of Ruth are read. Ruth, as the ancestress of King David, was one of the most prominent biblical “converts,” and her death has been traditionally placed on Shavuot.<sup>87</sup> Placing the *ger zedek*’s death on that festival, and more specifically on its second day, appears to be a conscious use of a topos.

To further highlight the careful composition of the *ger zedek* story, it is worth noting that elements of the story are found both in earlier and contemporary Catholic sources. A Polish nobleman, Marcin Matuszewicz, mentioned in his memoirs an incident from the end of the seventeenth century, in which a noblewoman, the wife of a certain Estko, Matuszewicz’s grandfather’s neighbor, studied the Bible and subsequently began to practice Judaism. She eventually left Poland for Amsterdam with her Jewish estate administrator, where she was reported to have converted to Judaism. Her husband eventually followed her and also

83. See Konarski, *Volumina Legum*, 4:238–39 and 5:355. Also the Magdeburg law prevalent in Polish towns subjected apostates to the death penalty, Groicki, *Porządek Sadow*, 199.

84. *Statut Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego* (Vilna, 1819), 317, chapter 12, article 7, paragraph 5: “A jeśli który Żyd abo Żydowka do Wiary Chrześcijańskiej przystąpili, tedy każda taka osoba i potomstwo ich za Szlachcica poczytani być mają.” Also published in *Statut Velikago Kniazhestva Litovskago: S Podvedeniem V Nadlezhashchikh Mestakh Ssylki Na Konstitutsii, Prilichnyiia Soderzhaniiu Onago: Perevod S Polskago*, (Sankt Petersburg: Pravitelstvuiushchii Senat, 1811), 2:271. Also, “Konstyucye Seymu Koronacyjnego 1764” in Konarski, *Volumina Legum*, 7:420–21. On this, see Jacob Goldberg, *Ha-Mumarim Be-Mamleket Polin-Lita* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1985), 48.

85. Admittedly Zarembo’s wife could have been considered an opportunistic convert, because she appears to have accepted Judaism to stay with her husband.

86. B. Pesahim 68b.

87. I place the quotation marks around the word “converts” here because Ruth cannot be regarded as a convert to Judaism as understood later by the rabbis. For reading Ruth as a symbolic convert see, e.g., *Ruth Rabah* (Vilna), parsha 2:16 [Lerner no. 12], 2:22 [Lerner no. 16], see also *Zohar Hādash*, vol. 2 (Megillot), Megilath Ruth 38a, Rashi’s commentary on Ruth 1:16, in *The Bar Ilan Responsa Project*, version 11. On the reading of Book of Ruth on Shavuot see, e.g., *Sefer Abudraham*, Tefilot Pesah, passage beginning with *nehagu ha-’olam*; Moses Isserles was aware of Abudraham’s work and he referred to it in one of his responsim in which he also reiterated the custom of reading the Book of Ruth on the second day of Shavu’ot, *Shut ha-Rema*<sup>2</sup>, no. 35; see also Magen Avraham on *Shulhan Arukh*, Oraḥ Hayyim, no. 490.8 and 490.17.

converted.<sup>88</sup> “His wife,” Matuszewicz wrote in his memoirs, “who loved to read books, began to read the Bible. Reading the Old Testament but not grasping it with her intelligence, she developed an inclination for the Jewish religion and began to celebrate the Jewish Sabbath and other holidays with the Jew, an arrendator. When her husband left for a trip, she fled to Amsterdam with her two daughters and this Jew. When Estko found out that she had gone to Amsterdam, he went after her to retrieve her. On reaching Amsterdam, he himself became Jewish.”<sup>89</sup> Matuszewicz’s father then met Estko on the street in Amsterdam, where they had a small religious disputation in Latin and Polish, in which other people apparently joined in. At the end, Estko’s wife died, and his daughters worked as “servants for some rich Jewish woman,” Matuszewicz wrote, underlining the consequences of the conversion to Judaism. Estko’s daughters not only lost their noble status but also fell as low as to become servants in Jewish homes, a status even lower than that of Jews in Poland, who often employed Christian servants in their homes.<sup>90</sup> According to Matuszewicz, after his wife’s death, Estko returned to Poland to claim his estate but was arrested. He managed to escape back to Amsterdam.

This story, somewhat altered, found its way into a polemical work against Protestants published in 1750 by a Jesuit polemicist and theologian, Jan Poszakowski (1684–1757). Poszakowski wrote that Estko, “having become Jewish with his wife, moved to Amsterdam in Holland, where he was forced by Jews to divorce his wife. [He then] married a Jewish woman, while his wife married a Jewish man.”<sup>91</sup> Poszakowski used this tale to polemicize against individual unsupervised Bible studies and Protestantism, which for him was a step toward “Judaizing.” The Estko story has elements paralleling the *ger zedek* story, mixing the Potocki and Zaremba plots—such as the travel to Amsterdam, conversion to Judaism, return to Lithuania, the arrest, and, in the polemical version, also a forced divorce and a marriage to Jewish partner. Although it is difficult to prove its direct influence on the development of the legend, the fact that from the late-seventeenth-century unpublished memoirs of Matuszewicz, it entered Catholic narrative may perhaps suggest that the Estko tale was known also among Jews and may have in part inspired the Jewish narrative of *ger zedek*.<sup>92</sup>

88. Marcin Matuszewicz, *Diariusz Życia Mego*, 3 vols. (Warsaw: PIW, 1986), 385–86. Daniel Stone discussed this case in Daniel Stone, “Knowledge of Foreign Languages among Eighteenth Century Polish Jews,” *Polin* 10 (1997): 215–16. Amsterdam was a well-known safe haven for Christian converts to Judaism, it included Sephardic crypto-Jews to return safely to Judaism, Ashkenazi Jews who had converted to Christianity to do the same, and Christians who decided to embrace Judaism, too. On this see, Elisheva Carlebach, “‘Ich Will Dich Nach Holland Schicken . . .’: Amsterdam and the Reversion to Judaism of German Jewish Converts,” in *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Martin Muslow and Richard Popkin (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004).

89. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz Życia Mego*, 385.

90. Matuszewicz, *Diariusz Życia Mego*, 386.

91. Jan Poszakowski, *Antidotum Contra “Antidotum Abo Zbawienna Przestroga,” Ze Lekarstwa Duszne Przeciwno Apostazyi Woyciecha Węgierskiego Niegdy Superintendenta Zborów Ewangelickich Sporządzone y Wygotowane Teraz Świeżo w Królewcu Roku Pańskiego 1750 Drukiem Opublikowane y Ogłoszone* (Wilno: Typis Societatis Jesu, 1754), 4.

92. Other tales of conversion circulated as well. Mateusz Mieses mentioned that a German work published in 1714 mentioned a Polish priest who allegedly converted to Judaism in Amsterdam. Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz also talked about Marcin Mikołaj Radziwiłł (1705–81), who allegedly celebrated Sab-

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The legend also contains fictitious elements closely resembling the second tale in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>93</sup> In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, "a Jew named Abraham, encouraged by Gianotto di Civigni, goes to the court of Rome" to find out whether Catholicism is indeed a valid religion.<sup>94</sup> When he reached Rome, he carefully observed:

the behavior of the Pope, the cardinals, and other prelates and courtiers; and from what he heard and saw for himself . . . from the highest to the lowest of them, they all in general shamelessly participating in the sin of lust, not only the natural kind of lust but also the sodomitic, without the least bit of remorse or shame. And this they did to the extent of that the power of whores and young boys was of not little importance in obtaining great favors. Besides this, he observed that all of them were open gluttons, drinkers, and sots, and that after their lechery, just like animals, they were more servants of their bellies than of anything else; the more closely he observed them, the more he saw that they were all avaricious and greedy for money and that they were just as likely to buy and sell human (even Christian) blood as they were to sell religious objects, belonging to the sacraments or to benefices. . . .<sup>95</sup>

Unlike the Christian nobleman from Poland, who after similar observations in Rome decided to convert to Judaism, the Jew Abraham, to Gianotto's utter astonishment, embraced Christianity. Abraham reasoned that despite all this "lust, avarice, gluttony, pride" and all the efforts "to reduce the Christian religion to nothing and drive it from the face of the earth," Christianity "continuously grows and becomes more illustrious" and, therefore, it must have "the Holy Spirit as its foundation and support."<sup>96</sup> *Ger Zedek* story is in effect an inversion of Boccaccio's tale; it is a Christian—not a Jew—who goes from Paris to Rome to discover the Catholic Church's immorality and who then converts to Judaism. How this story entered Polish Jewish lore is unclear. There were many Yiddish renditions of non-Jewish stories, including those by Boccaccio's *Decameron* in premodern Europe, but I am not aware of a Yiddish version of this particular story.<sup>97</sup> Italian Ashkenazic Jews certainly

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bath and kashruth. Mateusz Mieses, "Judaizanci We Wschodniej Europie," *Miesięcznik Żydowski* 4, no. 3 (1934): 259–60. See also, Abraham G. Duker, "Polish Frankism's Duration: From Cabbalistic Judaism to Roman Catholicism and from Jewishness to Polishness," *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 4 (1963): 311.

93. I am deeply indebted to Prof. Gershon Bacon of Bar Ilan University in Israel for this insight.

94. Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron: A New Translation*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: Norton & Company, 1977), 28.

95. Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 30.

96. Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 31.

97. For a version of a few Boccaccio's stories in Yiddish see, e.g., *Sheyne Artliche Geshichtn* (Amsterdam, 1710). On this, see an article by Marion Aptroot, "A Yiddish Adaptation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Amsterdam 1710)" in *Zutot* 2003, ed. Shlomo Berger (Amsterdam: Kluwer, 2004). For another example of an adaptation of European literature into Yiddish, see Elia Levita's *Bove Bukh*. Levita adapted an Italian translation of the Anglo-Roman romance, "Sir Bevis of Hampton" into Yiddish, first published in 1541 and then followed by many editions. Stenschnieder mentions an "imitation" of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Moritz Steinschnieder, *Letteratura Italiana dei Giudei: Cenni* (Rome: Tipografia delle scienze matematiche e fisiche, 1884), 33.

knew it. In the 1616 Italian version of Benjamin Slonik's *Seder mizvot nashim*, the translator of the originally Yiddish work on women's commandments urged the Ashkenazic Jewish women in Italy to read his book so that they might benefit more from it than from reading "profane books," such as those by Ariosto, the *Decameron* (*le cento novelle*), and *Amadis de Gaula*.<sup>98</sup> It is possible that it became known to Jews through other versions as well. Boccaccio's *Decameron* became very popular in other European languages and was published in numerous translations and adaptations in Latin, German, French, and English. Its French version, for example, was published as early as 1485, and its German version appeared already in 1509; they were followed by numerous editions through the eighteenth century. Even Martin Luther adapted Boccaccio's story of Abraham the Jew in his *Table Talk*, although he claimed that it was an authentic contemporary story:

A Jew came to me at Wittenberg, and said: He was desirous to be baptized, and made a Christian, but that he would first go to Rome to see the chief head of Christendom. From this intention, myself, Philip Melancton, and other divines, laboured to dissuade him, fearing lest, when he witnessed the offences and knaveries at Rome, he might be scared from Christendom. But the Jew went to Rome, and when he had sufficiently seen the abominations acted there, he returned to us again, desiring to be baptized, and said: Now I will willingly worship the God of the Christians, for he is a patient God. If he can endure such wickedness and villainy as is done at Rome, he can suffer and endure all the vices and knaveries of the world.<sup>99</sup>

Just as Luther adapted Boccaccio's story to his agenda of condemning Catholicism and affirming his own version of Christianity, so was the Jewish version modified to affirm Judaism. Both claimed to be true stories.

### *A Polemic Against Catholicism*

In affirming Judaism, the legend is also a polemic against Catholicism. The Hebrew text of the *ger zedek* legend includes a number of condescending passages against Catholicism that were, perhaps not surprisingly, lost in the Polish translation. It is possible that before publishing the Polish translation of the legend, Kraszewski, or the translator of the text, Alexander Ellenbogen, chose to gloss over

98. See *Precetti da esser imparati dalle donne hebre*, (Venice: Giacomo Sarzina, 1616), 3. The tales entered different cultures and influenced future writers. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* is modeled on the third story of the first day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The story of Abraham was adapted by a number of different European authors, including Luther who adapted this tale in his *Tischreden*, see below. See also, Florence Nightingale Jones, *Boccaccio and His Imitators in German, English, French, Spanish and Italian Literature, "the Decameron"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910), 12; Sonja Zoeller, "Abraham und Melchisedech in Deutschland, oder Von Religionsgespräch, Unblehrbarkeit und Toleranz: Zur Rezeption der beiden Juden aus Giovanni Boccaccios "Decamerone" in der deutschen Schwankliteratur des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Aschkenas* 7, no. 2 (1997): especially, 308, 12–16.

99. Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), 353–54, no. 869.

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some of the anti-Catholic statements.<sup>100</sup> The whole tale, from the beginning to the end, can be seen as a polemic against Catholicism. This is especially true of the Hebrew text, but even the Polish version retains some of these polemical elements, and after all, Judaism triumphs there too. When Potocki and Zaremba encountered the old Jew studying the Talmud, for example, they heard a diatribe against Catholicism, coupled with a reassurance that the Talmud contained the truth:

And the old man responded that this book is called *bavli* [the Babylonian Talmud] and it is in the holy tongue. And they asked him to tell them what is in this book and he read to them many passages and explained them [to the young men]. And they liked the words of this book and they asked the old man whether all what was written there was the truth. And the old man responded that all of this was very much true [*hu' emet me'od*]. [And they asked], "If this is all true, then why does our teacher not teach us using this book and why are you reading it?" And the old man responded, "You are Christians and your faith comes from a man who leads you astray, away from a straight path [*h-ish ha-masiah otkhem ve-ha-mateh otkhem me-ha-derekh ha-yashar*]." <sup>101</sup>

The Talmud and its validity are sharply juxtaposed to the falsehood of Catholicism. Its unquestionable truth [*hu' emet me'od*] is contrasted with the human origin of the Catholic beliefs, which ultimately leads to error. Indeed, it could not lead anywhere else, as the *ger zedek* discovered in Rome, for it was all based on lies. For example, when *ger zedek* went to Rome, he wanted to find out what happened when the pope, while sitting in his innermost chambers [*be-hedero ha-hadarim*], ascended to the heavens on a holy day.<sup>102</sup> The papal servant, on receiving a generous gift, yet another sign of corruption in Rome, said the ascension was a total lie. Instead, the servant claimed, there is a whore in the innermost chamber waiting for the pope, who prepared all his meals for him. This narrative of the pope ascending to the heavens from the innermost chamber, again, may have been a consciously constructed counter narrative, for it parallels and inverts the Jewish tradition on the role of the High Priest. When the Temple still stood, the High Priest entered the Temple's Holy of Holies on the fast day of Yom Kippur. In addition, according to the rabbinic tradition, the priest was removed from his house before the fast of Yom Kippur and entered a separate chamber in the Temple, among other things, lest he have an intercourse with his wife and become polluted, should she be in a state of impurity.<sup>103</sup> By presenting the pope's functions entirely reversed, the narrator may

100. Kraszewski admitted to shortening some "loose passages," which perhaps might explain some of the inconsistencies. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 183, n. 7.

101. The text actually has a spelling mistake and instead of *masiah* has *metsah*. I thank Edward Fram of Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, Israel, for pointing out to me that the second part of this expression comes from Joseph Albo's *Sefer Ikarim* (4:28). The Polish text simply says "the Pope."

102. I am not aware of any Catholic holidays during which the pope is believed to enter a secret holy chamber to commune with God or to ascend to heaven.

103. Leviticus 16. *Heder ha-haderim* may be a parallel of *kodesh ha-kadoshim*, perhaps avoided here not to link the pope to the *kodesh ha-kadoshim*. See also M. Yoma 1.1 on the High Priest's preparations for Yom Kippur, and B. Yoma 2a-b, an entire discussion of the role of the High Priest. It

have sought to underline not only the corruption of the Catholic Church but also to refute any notion that Catholicism replaced Judaism, and that the pope was the high priest.

Another example of the anti-Catholic polemic in the Hebrew text comes from the subplot of Zaremba, the *ger zedek*'s friend. When Zaremba, his wife and their child left Lithuania and reached Prussia, the narrator inserted a comment, lost in the Polish translation, that they liked the customs of the Prussian people because their religion was unquestionably better than that of the lords in Lithuania—a clear stab at Catholicism, because most of Prussian nobles were Lutherans.<sup>104</sup> The description of the religion of the Lithuanian lords in rather unambiguous negative terms was likely not accidental and may have been intended to counter the potential temptation that the possibility of ennoblement, according to the 1588 Third Lithuanian Statute, may have offered to Jews converting to Catholicism.

Finally, another example of anti-Christian invectives is found toward the end of the tale. There, the Hebrew text refers to the crucifix as “dead dog” [*ha-kelev ha-met*], a powerful invective to describe the symbol of the Christian God.<sup>105</sup> It was clearly too harsh to appear in Polish, where it was rendered as “golden cross.”

Why was there a need for such apologetics and polemic among Polish Lithuanian Jews in the second half of the eighteenth century. After all, the Lithuanian Statute had been in place since 1588. For one thing, Polish law changed. In 1768, on pressure from Russia, Prussia, Denmark, England, and Sweden, Polish Christian law repealed the death penalty for apostasy.<sup>106</sup> This may have emboldened Jews, who were no longer fearful of serious consequences for proselytism. But more likely, it was pressures from the Catholic Church and other religious challenges that the Jewish community faced that created a need for such polemic and reassurance.

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may also be a vague reference to the Jewish legend of St. Peter, who was supposed to have been sent by Jews to be the first leader of Christians but had to conceal his true beliefs and had his servants build a tower with a room in which he would secretly perform Jewish rituals. I thank David Lerner for referring me to this story and his article, Lerner, “The Enduring Legend of the Jewish Pope,” 163–64.

104. The Polish text instead focused on the prosperity of Prussia. “And they reached Königsberg and settled there for a year. They liked the customs of the people in Prussia because the rural dwellings there were more beautiful than the dwellings found in Lithuania. And a peasant in Prussia lives in a house as beautiful as a lord in Lithuania.” Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 177.

105. Anti-Christian invectives are nothing new here. See, for example, *Sefer Toledot Yeshu*, Gurland, *Le-Korot Ha-Gezerot 'Al Yisra'el*, Habermann, ed., *Sefer Gezerot Ashkenaz Ve-Tsarfat*, Ha-Levi, *The Kuzari (Kitab Al Khazari)*. The phrase “dead dog,” *kelev met*, is used in I Samuel 24:14, in an exchange between Saul and David; *ha-kelev ha-met* in II Samuel 9:8, in Mephiboshet's humble response to David: “What is your servant that you should regard for a dead dog like me?”; and in II Samuel 16:9 by Avishai as an insult: “Why let that dead dog abuse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head!”

106. For laws concerning the non-Catholic Christians promulgated at the 1768 Sejm, see Konarski, *Volumina Legum*, 7:256–74. Article I, § III repeals death penalty and sets expulsion as the punishment for apostasy: *Cum religionem Romanam Catholicam in Polonia dominantem, Iuribus Cardinalibus annumeremus, transitum ab Ecclesia Romana ad aliam quamcunque religionem in hoc Poloniae Regno, Magno Ducatu Lit. et in annexis Provinciis criminaliter delictum declaramus. Qui itaque futuris temporibus transpire ausus fuerit, exul Dominiis Reipublicae esto*, Konarski, *Volumina Legum*, 7:257.

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In the late seventeenth and the entire eighteenth century, the Catholic Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became increasingly more interested in converting Jews.<sup>107</sup> In 1737, in the Wilno diocese, a priest Szczepan Turczynowicz, founded a religious order called Sisters of Mariae Vitae (*mariawitki*), whose goal was to convert Jewish women to Catholicism.<sup>108</sup> Jesuits in this diocese also intensified their missionary activity in the eighteenth century and preached in synagogues.<sup>109</sup> So too, in the neighboring diocese of Łuck-Brest, the zealous bishop Franciszek Antoni Kobielski (1679–1755) preached in synagogues and encouraged missionary activities among Jews.

Kobielski approached the Dominican General in Rome to be informed about methods used by the Dominicans to convert Jews in Rome and then published the general's detailed response into a collection of his letters.<sup>110</sup> The bishop seems to have tried to apply some of these methods himself, and in publishing them, he certainly wanted to make them known in Poland.<sup>111</sup> He also published a collection of his conversionary sermons aimed at Jews.<sup>112</sup> In his 1741 pastoral letter to the Jews of his diocese, Franciszek Antoni Kobielski wrote that "out of our Pastoral obligation and the authority given to us by God over all neighbors" he desired the Jews' conversion, and, therefore, he "commanded the superiors of the Churches in our diocese, having advised you about the time, to demonstrate at least once every four months to you, gathered in your synagogues or schools, the proofs about the Messiah and Incarnated God, from your Prophets and Scriptures, clearly described by the Patriarchs, Prophets, and St. David, your King of Israel, by Prophet Jeremiah, in your Psalms and other books." Jews also had their obligations. Kobielski commanded them "to receive with respect the priests who come to you with God's word and teachings in your schools, and to listen to them."<sup>113</sup>

107. For more on this, see Teter, "Jewish Conversions to Catholicism."

108. Goldberg, *Ha-Mumarim Be-Mamlekhet Polin-Lita*, 37–39.

109. Teter, "Jewish Conversions to Catholicism."

110. *Litterae Pastorales ad Clerum et Populum utriusque Diaecesis . . . in Anno 1740 et 1741 ac Praesenti 1742 Emanatae*, 1742, E2–E2v. In 1749, several years after Kobielski's inquiry, the pope issued a letter endorsing forced preaching to Jews, but I found no evidence that Polish clergy were familiar with this document. Mario Rosa, "La Santa Sede e gli ebrei nel Settecento," *Storia d'Italia: Annali* 11/2 (1997): 1073.

111. Elsewhere, I have overemphasized the inability to implement such policies in Poland as a result of a different political structure and the Church's lack of access to executive powers. Kobielski's efforts were still limited in Poland, Teter, "Jewish Conversions to Catholicism."

112. *Światło na oświecenie narodu niewiernego to iest Kazania w Synagogach żydowskich miane oraz Relfexye y List odpowiadający na pytania Synagogi Brodzkiej z Rozkazu Jaśnie Wielmożnego Jego Mości Xiędza Franciszka Antoniego Kobielskiego, Biskupa Łuckiego y Brzeskiego . . . o pozyskanie Dusz zelusem nieustannym pracującego do druku podane*, (Lvov, 1746). For a detailed discussion of this work, see Judith Kalik "Ha-Knesiyah Ha-Katolit Ve-Ha-Yehudim Be-Mamlekhet Polin-Lita Ba-Me'ot Ha-17–18" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1998), 41–45. Unlike the Protestant missionaries to Jews in Poland from the Institutum Judaicum et Muhammedicum in Halle, who learned Yiddish and approached Jews in this language, there is no evidence that Kobielski preached in any other language than Polish.

113. *Wszem wobec y każdemu z osobna, osobliwie niewiernym Rabinom Kahalnym, y całemu współstwu Żydowstwa w Diecezyi Naszey Łuckiej y Brzeskiej zostającym* (Łuck, 1741). Also pub-

In his 1749 report *ad limina*, Kobielski wrote to Pope Benedict XIV that he “visited Jewish synagogues in all places,” where he “preached pastoral sermons so that they may convert.”<sup>114</sup> He boasted that “God so blessed the works of my pastoral care that many of the infidels were converted and baptized, and the number of those receiving religious instruction [*catechumenorum*], just as that of the other poor, rises daily.”<sup>115</sup>

With this increasing pressure to convert, Jews must have felt the need to take measures that would counteract these incursions. The fact that Rafał Sentimani, a Catholic, was willing to die for Judaism offered Jews a good opportunity to reaffirm the truth of their faith. This was at least some of the background in which the *ger zedek* tale emerged and soon took a life of its own.

Such polemic and apologetics were indeed necessary, for the second half of the eighteenth century brought another crisis—this time within the Jewish community, with the participation of the Catholic Church. In the 1750s, a heretical and antinomian movement led by Jacob Frank emerged among Jews in Poland, which led to the involvement of the Catholic Church in internal Jewish affairs and eventually resulted in conversions to Catholicism and the ennoblement of Frank and numerous followers.<sup>116</sup>

Born in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in Podolia, the south-eastern borderlands of the country, Jacob Frank grew up in the Ottoman Empire and arrived back in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1755. In the Ottoman Empire, he was influenced by Sabbatean trends and internalized the teachings of some Sabbatean groups still active there in the eighteenth century. While in Izmir and Salonika (present-day Thessaloniki), Frank had mystical visions and began engaging in antinomian behavior, delighting, according to his autobiography, in trying to force pious Jews into antinomian activities.<sup>117</sup> The Jews of Salonika tried to expel him and apparently even assassinate him, and so in 1755, Frank left for

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lished in *Litterae Pastorales ad Universum Clerum, et Populum Utriusque Diaecesis Illustrissimi & Reverendissimi Domini Francisci Antonii in Dmenin Kobielski Episcopi Luceoriensis et Brestensis, Serenissimae Reginalis Maiestatis Cantellarii cum Annexis de Verbo ad Verbum in Tersimonium Legis Suae Sanctissimi Domini Nostri Benedicti Papae XIV Constitutionibus Et Literis in Anno 1740 Et 1741 Ac Praesenti 1742*. (no place, 1742), E3-Fv. More recently in Goldberg, *Ha-Mumarim be-Mamlekhet Polin-Lita*, 76–81; and Kaźmierczyk *Żydzi polscy*, 53–7. Kobielski also proselytized among Protestants, something that raised their ire and made the bishop abandon his efforts. See Jan Doktor, *W Poszukiwaniu Żydowskich Kryptochrześcijan: Dzienniki Ewangelickich Misjonarzy z ich Wedrówek po Rzeczypospolitej w Latach 1730–1747* (Warsaw: Tikkun, 1999), 228–29.

114. MS. 464 Luceoriensis in Archivio Segreto Vaticano, S. Congregationis Relationes Status ad Limina. Also in *Relationes Status Dioecesium in Magno Ducatu Lithuaniae*, 2:155. Studio itaque deperdito aliud assumpsi medium officii meo Pastoralis incumbens evangelissandi videlicet in Sinagogis verbum Dei unde circum eundo, ac lustrando diaecesis meam in omnibus lucis Synagogas Iudaeorum visitavi, praedicationes ac sermones pastorales pro conversione eorumdem ipsemet feci, ac per alias personas habiles et eruditad eosdem fieri curavi.

115. MS. 464 Luceoriensis and *Relationes Status Dioecesium in Magno Ducatu Lithuaniae*, 2:155.

116. Alexander Kraushar, *Frank i Frankiści Polscy, 1726–1816*, 2 vols. (Cracow: G. Gebethner i spółka, 1895), 1:21.

117. Kraushar, *Frank i Frankiści*, 1:59–60.



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Poland. Although, according to his version of events, he left because of the calling he had received, it is more likely that he left because of the pressures from the Jews of Salonika.<sup>118</sup>

After arriving in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Frank continued to travel. He visited Mohilev, a town in present-day Belarus, and several towns in southeastern parts of the state. He continued to engage in antinomian behavior for which he was excommunicated by local rabbis in 1756. After that, as Paweł Maciejko has recently argued, the rabbis turned to Catholic Church to muster help against Frank and his followers and caused a tide of allegations of heresy among Jews.<sup>119</sup> The bishop of Kamieniec Podolski seized the opportunity to assert his authority over Jewish matters and began investigating these claims.

Frank and his supporters attacked the rabbinic Jews, whom they called “Talmudists,” on religious questions, especially the Talmud, casting *them* as blasphemers and heretics for using the Talmud. This was a prelude to the longer conflict and the two disputations between Frank and his followers and the Jews in 1757 in Kamieniec Podolski and in 1759 in Lwów, held under the auspices of the Catholic Church leadership. The two debates became known in Poland as debates between the Talmudists and Counter-Talmudists. This whole affair opened up possibilities of further incursions by the Catholic clergy into Jewish communities. Indeed, Bishop Dębowski was able to summon Jewish rabbis to attend these debates under a threat of corporal punishment (*sub poenis etiam corporis afflictivis*).<sup>120</sup> In 1760, a special catechism was published by an anonymous Jesuit in Lwów for instruction of “those who come from the Jewish faith to Christian Catholic faith” as a result of Jacob Frank’s activity, or the “Counter-Talmudists.”<sup>121</sup>

The crisis brought on by Frank and his followers, their attacks on the Talmud, and the general pressures from the Church in the eighteenth century could not have gone unnoticed by Jewish leaders in Poland.<sup>122</sup> They may explain the

118. Kraushar, *Frank i Frankiści*, 63–64.

119. Earlier view was that it was the Frankists who turned to the Church for help. Kraushar cites a statement of Bishop Dębowski of Kamieniec Podolski, saying that Frankists *sub Nostram protectionem recurrentes* [turned to Us for Our protection]. Kraushar, *Frank i Frankiści*, 1:77. But Paweł Maciejko argues in his work that it was the rabbis who turned to the Church to fight the spreading heresy. Paweł Maciejko, “The Development of the Frankist Movement in Poland, the Czech Lands, and Germany (1755–1816)” (Ph.D. diss., Hertford College of the University of Oxford, 2003).

120. Kraushar, *Frank i Frankiści*, 1:88–89.

121. *Katechizm Misjonarski Pismem Starego y Nowego Zakonu Tudzież Podaniem Starodawnym Israelskim Obiaśniony. Dla Nauki y Ćwiczenia Tych Którzy z Wiary Żydowskiej do Wiary Chrześcijańskiej Katolickiej Przychodzą Napisany Przez Kapłana Soc: Jesu*, (Lwów: Drukarnia Akademicka, 1760), see the foreword “Przedmowa.”

122. These debates resonated among the Polish Catholic clergy as well; several clergymen published works on this topic. Konstantyn Awedyk, *Kazanie Po Dysputach Contra Talmudystów w Lwowie w Kościele Katedralnym Lwowskim Miáne. Przytem Historia o Contra Talmudystach Wszystkie Dworniejsze Okoliczności, Nawrocenia Ich do Wiary Św. i Dalszych Postępkow Opisująca* (Lwów: Typis Societatis Jesu, 1760); Konstantyn Awedyk, *Opisanie Wszystkich Dworniejszych Okoliczności Nawrocenia do Wiary S. Contra Talmudystów Abo Historia Krótka Ich Początki i Dalsze Sposoby Przystępowania do Wiary S. Wyrazająca* (Lwów: Typis Societatis Jesu, 1760); Stanisław Kleczewski, *Dysertacya Albo Mowa o Pismach Żydowskich y Talmudzie Podczas Walney Dysputy Contra Tal-*

emergence of the legend of *ger zedek* in the second half of the eighteenth century. The legend, after all, is both an anti-Catholic polemic and a strong voice in support of the validity of the Talmud and other Jewish writings, which it juxtaposes to the Catholic religion and presents as inspiration for the Polish Catholic nobles to convert to Judaism.

*Other Internal Disruptions*

The mid- and late eighteenth century brought also other challenges to the Jews of Poland-Lithuania. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Jews in eastern Europe saw the rise of the *ḥasidic* movement and, somewhat later in the nineteenth century, the Haskalah, both of which to various degrees were resisted by the Jewish leadership, and, as was the case of Hasidism, turned into an outright ideological war.<sup>123</sup> Wilno was the center of resistance to Hasidism. The *ger zedek* legend contains minor elements that seem to relate to these struggles as well, suggesting that the narrators adjusted it to their contemporary needs.

The legend's motif of glorifying the study of the Torah and other rabbinic literature may be seen as an indirect response also to the early *ḥasidic* apparent neglect of the study of the Torah. Letters from the 1770s issued by Wilno community leaders against *ḥasidim* emphasize that they neglect (*mevatlim*) the Torah study, a frequent accusation in the anti-*ḥasidic* literature.<sup>124</sup>

The opponents of the *ḥasidic* movement (the *mitnagdim*) in Wilno emphasized that *ḥasidim* split the community and were going against traditions and customs established by generations of ancestors.<sup>125</sup> The separation occurred on various levels: *ḥasidim* organized their own prayer groups, turned away from the traditionally adhered to Ashkenazic rites, and followed Sephardic rites. They slaughtered their own meat and did not buy from the community.<sup>126</sup> But, one of the most frequent accusations against the *ḥasidim* voiced in the early anti-*ḥasidic* documents was that of the way they prayed. "And among them they learn to be reckless in their prayers, and they are vain because they are a perverse generation," one letter stated. "They behave strangely in front of the Ark of the Covenant," it continued, "with commotions of the strangers and gentiles, with their heads down and their legs up . . . in disrespect for the Law [*afkiruta*]. And their religion is different from that of all of the Jewish people, and they do not follow the religion of the King of Kings, Holy Blessed be He; and they organize themselves into separate groups to leaving customs of our ancestors, and in their prayer they transgress

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*mudzystów z Talmudystami Pod Rządem J. W. Xiędza Szczepana z Mikulicz Mikulskiego* (1759); Gaudenty Pikulski, *Złość Żydowska Przeciwno Bogu i Bliźniemu Prawdzie y Sumieniu Na Obiaśnienie Przeklętych Talmudystów* (Lwów: 1758).

123. See, e.g., David E. Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov, Reappraisals in Jewish Social and Intellectual History* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), especially chap. 1.

124. Mordekhai Wilensky, *Ḥasidim U-Mitnagdim: Le Toledot Ha-Pulmus She Beneihem* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1970), 38, and also note 13 there, and 59. See also there, 52–53 for the emphasis on the study of Torah, Talmud, and Halakhah.

125. Wilensky, *Ḥasidim U-Mitnagdim*, 45, 46–47, 50, 51.

126. Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews*, 12.

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the limits that our ancestors set, and all of them rise their voices and make noises in their prayers . . . . And they stop in the middle of the prayer, and they despise the students of the Holy Torah, and always they shout in play and mockery and the merriment of madness.”<sup>127</sup> Another letter accused the *ḥasidim* of “dancing and leaping” during prayers, and of opening their mouths wide in screams that are heard from afar.<sup>128</sup> In this light, the glorification of the Torah and, perhaps also, the comment that the *ger zedek* made to the unruly child in the synagogue in Ilia—that he would not grow up in the Jewish religion—may perhaps be residue of a polemic against *ḥasidim* in the area, or perhaps this, too, refers to Jacob Frank and his movement.<sup>129</sup>

So too, comments surrounding the *ger zedek*’s trip to Germany reveal hints of opposition to the Haskalah, a Jewish enlightenment movement that emerged in Germany and then spread with limited success to eastern Europe.<sup>130</sup> “And the *ger zedek* went first to Germany after he left Amsterdam,” the text that Kraszewski had at hand, but not the Hebrew version available today, says “but he could not bear their customs because they mixed with Gentiles and accepted their ways.”<sup>131</sup> Asserting the validity and superiority of Judaism over Christianity, as the legend does, may have resonated with Lithuanian Jews also at the times of their first encounters with modernity.

From the second half of the eighteenth century, the Jewish community in Eastern Europe faced religious challenges from Catholicism, Frankism, Hasidism, and the Haskalah. It needed religious stability, and the legend of *ger zedek*, which affirmed the truth of Judaism in no uncertain terms, served that purpose. The legend continues to resonate with the Jewish public and to respond to new pressures, as its appeal within the *ḥaredi* community suggests. But this legend is also about permeability of social and cultural boundaries between Jews and Christians, not only because it tells of Christians who become Jews, but also because it illustrates Jewish appropriation of Christian literary topoi, such as Boccaccio’s Abraham from Paris or other tales of conversions.

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127. Wilensky, *Ḥasidim U-Mitnagdim*, 39–40.

128. Wilensky, *Ḥasidim U-Mitnagdim*, 54. A book *Shever pesh'im* claimed that when *ḥasidim* want to banish strange thoughts during prayers “they begin to scream greatly and loudly.” Wilensky, *Ḥasidim U-Mitnagdim*, 54. In another place their screams were compared to those of bears, as cited in Wilensky, *Ḥasidim U-Mitnagdim*, 59 n. 15.

129. The battle between *ḥasidim* and *mitnagdim* involved numerous denunciations and counter-denunciations to the Russian government in the 1790s. Fishman, *Russia’s First Modern Jews*, 21.

130. On the early Haskalah in Russia see, e.g., Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia, 1825–1855*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 49–96.

131. Kraszewski, *Wilno*, 179.