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# Experiences of Jews Who Converted to Christianity before and during the Holocaust

An Overview of Testimonies in the Fortunoff Video Archive

## Abstract

Research on Jews who converted to Christianity before and during the Holocaust has been scarce until recently, although since the 1980s survivors' testimonies began to mention such experiences more often. This article offers a first general overview of 97 testimonies found in the Fortunoff Video Archive of Holocaust Testimonies that describe the experience of conversion of Holocaust survivors. Based on the information provided by these testimonies it 1) analyses the attitudes of Christian and Jewish institutions and individuals towards converts and 2) explores the way in which the experience of conversion impacted the sense of belonging and Jewish identity of the survivors.

Conversion to Christianity was something hundreds of thousands of Jews underwent before and during the Holocaust. Joseph Jacobs estimated that through the nineteenth century the number of Jewish conversions to Christianity worldwide was 204,542. The greatest numbers were in Russia (84,536), the Austria-Hungary (44,756), the United Kingdom (28,830), and Germany (22,520).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, we lack such centralised figures from 1900 to the period of the Holocaust, although we know from post-war testimonies and the available scholarship that the trend of conversions intensified in many countries immediately prior to and during the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup>

This article is an overview of 97 testimonies found in the Fortunoff Video Archive of Holocaust Testimonies that describe the experience of conversion of Holocaust survivors. An annotated edition based on an in-depth analysis of one testimony has been submitted and will soon become available on the Yale Library and the Fortunoff Video Archive websites. This article takes as its starting point Yaakov Ariel's definition of conversion: "Converts are defined as those persons, in Nazi occupied Europe, who, in preparation for, or during, or as a consequence of the Nazi pursuit, its upheavals, displacements and danger, chose to adopt Christianity, as a shelter, a mask, or a spiritual haven, temporarily or permanently."<sup>3</sup> There are two significant additions in my approach, both on account of the data found in the Fortunoff Ar-

1 Joseph Jacobs, *Statistics*, in: *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, New York/London 1905, Vol. 11, 530. An online version is available under: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13992-statistics> (18 February 2020).

2 See for example: Todd Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold. Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, Princeton 2015, 150-158. See also: Viktor Karadi, *The Jews of Europe in the Modern Era*, Budapest/New York 2004, 38.

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

chive: 1) This article also takes into consideration people who converted to Christianity before the Nazi ascension to power, but still identified as Jews after conversion. 2) As this article examines testimonies of people who in their vast majority were small children at the time of conversion, it considers as converts also those who did not choose to change religion, but were rather following their parents' initiative or the initiative of some temporary guardians.

In terms of Christian denominations chosen for conversion, the Fortunoff testimonies mention Catholicism (the majority), Protestantism, and Orthodox Christianity. The denomination was usually dependent on the majority religion in a specific country. For example, most testimonies from Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia mention Catholicism as the chosen religion, while testimonies from Greece and Serbia mention conversion to Orthodox Christianity. The idea that conversion to Catholicism was preferred because it would offer better protection than other churches appears in some testimonies. This idea also appears in primary sources and secondary literature on conversions in Romania.<sup>4</sup> The Protestant denominations, although the second largest group of conversions in the Fortunoff testimonies, are rarely specified. Often this is because the interviewer failed to ask which Protestant denomination the interviewees was referring to. In some cases, conversions to Lutheranism and Anglicanism were specifically mentioned.

This article has three parts. The first provides a brief examination of the state of research and an explanation of methodology. The second describes the attitude of Christian and Jewish communities towards converts as they appear in the Fortunoff testimonies. It also examines information found in the testimonies in light of prior historical information about conversion. The last part presents, in summary, the way in which the experience of conversion impacted the sense of belonging and Jewish identity of the survivors.

### State of Research and Methodology

Research into the number of conversions during the Shoah, the effect of this experience on the converts' lives/identities/belonging, and the ways in which they were treated by Christian and Jewish communities, was scarce until recently. This was due, to some extent, to the lack of sources, as for a long time converts did not speak out about this topic. Yaakov Ariel rightly argued in one of the most seminal articles on conversions of Jews to Christianity during the Holocaust that, while a number of authors wrote during the 1950s and 1960s about Jews hiding among "Aryans", or about the reclaiming of Jewish children after the war, their narrative "[was] carrying a Jewish heroic undertone", that it "largely overlooked the religious aspects of conversions, and did not relate to their spiritual and communal contexts".<sup>5</sup> In the last decade, however, interest in the impact of conversions has increased and more steps have been taken to understand this forgotten group of Holocaust survivors. Several topics such as the effects of conversion on the relation of Jews to their faith,<sup>6</sup> the psy-

4 See: Ion Popa, Reactions of Converted Jews and Their Families to Anti-Semitic Laws, Romania 1940–1942, in: *The Historical Journal of the Romanian Jewish Community* 1 (2016), 267.

5 Ariel, *From Faith to Faith*, 38.

6 Ronald Berger, *To Be Or Not To Be. The Holocaust and Jewish Identity In The Postwar Era*, in: *Humanity and Society*, 31 (February 2007) 1, 24–42. See also: Julia Matveev, Vladimir Vertlib *On 'Jewish Identity in Particular and Identity and Belonging in General'*, in: *German Life and Letters* 68 (July 2015) 3, 1468–1483.

chological impact of conversion on Jewish identity,<sup>7</sup> or the phenomenon of Jewish children who converted during the years of the Holocaust and the attempts to bring them back into the Jewish fold in the immediate post-war years,<sup>8</sup> have seen notable progress.

However, the progress has been slow, which might also have to do with the fact that conversion has for a long time been a controversial topic. The case of Shmuel Oswald Rufeisen,<sup>9</sup> who was denied Israeli citizenship in 1962 because of his conversion to Christianity, polarised not only Israeli society but the academic world, too. Some historians who tackled the topic from a narrow perspective argued that conversion was apostasy not only from Judaism, but from Jewish identity altogether.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, controversial aspects, such as that of Oswald Rufeisen, were avoided entirely, or, when mentioned, any information about his application for and subsequent rejection of Israeli citizenship was omitted.<sup>11</sup>

Although a careful analysis of “Jewish conversions to Christianity, and attempts at adopting hybrid identities, have been mostly overlooked”,<sup>12</sup> details on how widespread this phenomenon was in various European countries have continued to come to light. One of the first countries that came under scrutiny was Hungary, where the number of converts was high. Randolph Braham put the number of Christians of Jewish origin residing in Hungary in 1941 at up to 100,000, including in his most recent edition of *The Politics of Genocide*.<sup>13</sup> Other historians<sup>14</sup> as well as the YIVO Encyclopaedia<sup>15</sup> put forward similar numbers, which are mostly based on statistical data released after the March–April 1941 census. Unfortunately, we do not have a critical assessment of these numbers, which is another symptom of the lack of in-depth research. In reference to conversions in Budapest in the months after the German occupation in 1944, Viktor Karadi wrote that “according to survey estimates” the number was “around 600 per 10,000 (i.e. per month)”.<sup>16</sup> While this estimate is interesting, the data put forward is not based on a comprehensive analysis and lacks any reference to sources. In Romania, the census of 1942 revealed that 4,631 out of 272,573 Jews who were still in the country after the change of borders and the killings and deportations of 1941/1942 were converts.<sup>17</sup> However, as in the case of Hungary, there is a need for a better understanding of the context in which these cen-

7 See for example: Katarzyna Prot-Klinger, Broken Identity. The Impact of the Holocaust on Identity in Romanian and Polish Jews, in: *The Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences*, 45 (2008) 4, 239-246.

8 Eva Fleischner, 'Who am I?' The Struggle for Religious Identity of Jewish Children Hidden by Christians during the Shoah, in: Jonathan Petropoulos/John K. Roth (ed.), *Gray Zones. Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, London 2012, 107-117. See also: Joanna Michlic, 'Who Am I?' The Identity of Jewish Children in Poland, 1945–1949, in: Polin. *Studies in Polish Jewry* 20 (2007), 98-121.

9 Shmuel Oswald Rufeisen (1922–1998) was a Polish-born Jew who converted to Catholicism during the Holocaust, becoming a friar of the Discalced Carmelite Order and better known as Brother (or Father) Daniel. He moved to Israel in the 1950s, where he sought citizenship under the Israeli Law of Return, but was refused because of his conversion. The decision was upheld by the Israeli Supreme Court in 1962. He later received Israeli citizenship but not based on the Law of Return.

10 David Katz, review of Todd Endelman (ed.), *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, New York/London 1987, in: *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 40-41 (1989), 264-265.

11 Oswald Rufeisen (Rufazjen), in: Robert Rozett/Shmuel Spector (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Chicago/London 2000, 394.

12 Yaakov, *From Faith to Faith*, 38.

13 Randolph Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary*, New York 32016, Vol. 1, 88.

14 William McCagg Jr., *Jewish Conversion in Hungary in Modern Times*, in: Endelman, *Jewish Apostasy*, 142. See also: Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold*, 152.

15 Magda Teter, *Conversion*, in: Gershon David Hundert (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, New Haven/London 2008, Vol. 1, 348-351.

16 Karadi, *The Jews of Europe*, 38.

17 “The Jewish Centre, Results of the 1942 Census. General Remarks,” in *The Archive of the Centre for the Study of the History of Romanian Jews (ACSIER)*, III/474, 1-2

suses were conducted, as depending on the threat to their life, a Jewish person may or may not have preferred to declare that they were Christian or Jewish. Although the topic of conversions in Western Europe has in the last decade appeared sporadically in research on the churches' attitudes towards Jews during the Holocaust and on the treatment of Jews in mixed marriages, we lack clear numbers and a clear overview of how widespread this phenomenon was in specific countries.

After the war, many survivors who had converted to Christianity, albeit in many cases temporarily, were embarrassed to mention their experience. The Fortunoff Video Archive, which was the first to start gathering video testimonies of Holocaust survivors, was initiated in 1979 by Dr. Dori Laub, a child survivor and psychiatrist born in Czernowitz (at the time in Romania) and Laurel Vlock, a television journalist who produced many interviews for Channel 8 in New Haven, Connecticut. From the beginning, they paid special attention to instructing the interviewers on the psychological dimensions of remembering past traumatic experiences.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the initial guidelines of the Fortunoff Archive stressed the importance of letting survivors remember their experiences without much intervention from the interviewers.<sup>19</sup> However, in my research of the 97 testimonies, the guidelines were not always followed. That was because of the professional background of the interviewers (Laurel Vlock, for example, tended to follow a media style of interviewing) or because of the expansion of the project to different locations. For example, in the interviews conducted at affiliate locations in Europe (especially those conducted in Yugoslavia), the survivors were often guided in their answers by the interviewer's multitude of questions.

In February 2019, when I began my fellowship at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI), I proceeded immediately to search for the following four key words (using the abbreviation "hvt" – Holocaust video testimony – in front of each term): conversion, converted, baptism, and baptised. I relied on Orbis, the search engine of the Yale University Library, where the Fortunoff Video Archive is based. Each testimony has a brief description of its content (usually between ten and twenty lines). The four searches produced 153 results, of which 97 were testimonies describing in one form or another the interviewee's experiences of conversion, while the rest were either duplicates or irrelevant as the words referred to something else or were about somebody else's conversion (usually parents, with very brief mentions). 61 testimonies were from female Holocaust survivors and 36 from males. The vast majority were children at the time of baptism. In terms of countries of origin, the largest group of testimonies by country was from people who either lived in Slovakia at the time of recording or were from there originally (26), which is due to the fact that during the 1990s the Fortunoff Archive had an active office in Bratislava, where some of these testimonies were recorded. In April and May 2019, the Fortunoff Video Archive started rolling out the beta version of another online platform called Aviary, which provides enhanced descriptions of testimonies. Another search using the term "conversion" produced 90 results (in comparison to 63 in my previous Orbis search). Due to time limitations, I could not check the new results. However, the first

18 See for example: Fortunoff Video Archive, Sterling Memorial Library, box 1, report on "existing literature on the psychological effects of videotaping on interviews" (undated, but the next document in the box is from December 1979, so this report was most likely written before). See also: Summary of meeting on 2 June, 1981 with Professor Geoffrey Hartman, Dr. Dori Laub, and Laurel Vlock of the Holocaust Survivors Film Project, 16 June 1981 (the pages in the box are not numbered).

19 See: *Ibid.*, Project procedures (undated, but the documents in the box before and after are from 1981), describing the procedures for pre-interview, interview, and post-interview.

sample of 97 overall testimonies is enough to offer an informed view on the way in which survivors remembered their experience of conversion.

As a discipline, history has been slow in taking testimonies of Holocaust survivors seriously and has instead “tended to focus much more heavily on the records left behind by the perpetrators”.<sup>20</sup> However, as Mark Roseman argued, the balance has recently shifted towards a “memory cult” around the survivors, who are being celebrated as heroic figures, or where “a different kind of ‘holiness’” has developed, “namely placing victims and survivors somehow outside the realm of normal human communication”.<sup>21</sup> While the historical value of the 97 Fortunoff testimonies examined in this article is incontestable, they should be seen in their complexity. Historical dates provided therein are sometimes incorrect and it is clear that the process of remembering is selective. However, I approached this source from the outset as any other historical document that requires critical analysis. The information discovered needs to be, wherever possible, supported by other primary or secondary sources. This is why, although this article is an overview of information found in testimonies of the Fortunoff Video Archive pertinent to the topic in question, in specific instances other primary or secondary sources are brought forward in order to examine the information provided.

### Attitudes of Christian and Jewish Communities toward Converted Jews as They Appear in the Fortunoff Video Archive

Although there is no Fortunoff testimony of converts from Romania, the available scholarship shows that the Catholic Church in Romania converted entire families during the Holocaust in open disobedience to state pressures.<sup>22</sup> In other countries, such as France, Belgium, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Serbia, or Greece, conversion was not necessarily an official policy, coming from the leadership of the Church, but a matter of local initiative and decision.<sup>23</sup> The 97 testimonies confirm this and offer important details (although not always explicitly) on the attitude of the churches toward converted Jews.

The Vatican responded, when asked, with guidelines on the conversion of Jews who found themselves in the life-threatening conditions of the Holocaust. For example, an enquiry from the papal nuncio to Bucharest, Monsignor Andrea Cassulo, was answered in May 1941 by the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, which insisted on a thorough examination of the aspiring converts and on guarantees that the catechumens would attend church and would perform Christian rituals. While insisting on the need for catechisation, the Supreme Sacred Congregation did make an exception in stipulating that, if the life of the aspiring convert was in danger, the priest could speed up the process, leaving the decision for its duration up

20 Mark Roseman, Foreword, in: Jürgen Matthäus (ed.), *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor. Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations*, Oxford 2009, vi.

21 *Ibid.*, v-vi.

22 See: Ion Popa, *Sanctuary from the Holocaust? Roman Catholic Conversion of Jews in Romania*, Bucharest, 1942, in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29 (Spring 2015) 1, 39-56.

23 See for example with regard to Belgium: Suzanne Vromen, *Hidden Children of the Holocaust. Belgian Nuns and their Daring Rescue of Young Jews from the Nazis*, Oxford 2008. On Protestants in France, especially the community of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, see: Miroslav Volf/Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Theology. Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Grand Rapids 2001, 150-165.

to the priest's judgement.<sup>24</sup> Orthodox churches had different positions on conversion, according to the decisions of their national church bodies. For example, the Romanian Orthodox Church in March 1938 forbade conversion of Jews who could not prove their Romanian citizenship, a policy maintained throughout the war.<sup>25</sup> Details on whether or how various Protestant churches discussed and decided on conversion of Jews during the Holocaust are limited. It seems that in this case, more than in others, a great deal of independence was asserted by local churches which dealt with this issue as they saw fit. According to one Fortunoff testimony, an Anglican orphanage in Czechoslovakia made the acceptance of Jewish children contingent upon baptism (as discussed further below).

The majority of survivors dismissed the importance of conversion as a survival strategy, hence minimising the role of the churches in helping them.<sup>26</sup> However, this should be correlated with their desire to deny the importance of conversion in order to emphasise their sense of Jewish belonging. In any case, the testimonies make evident that conversion was a cog in the mechanism of survival. Several testimonies describe how Christian individuals and institutions made other means of survival conditional upon conversion. For example, in the case of Ann W., who was born in Radziłów, Poland, the villagers made the hiding of the family conditional upon conversion to Catholicism.<sup>27</sup> Ann W.'s case is peculiar and, to a large extent, singular in the Fortunoff collection.<sup>28</sup> However, while making help conditional upon conversion was rare in the case of villagers, the phenomenon occurred often in the case of religious institutions. According to the Fortunoff testimonies, Protestant convents and/or orphanages refused to take children inside unless they converted. For example, David K., who was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia (today Czech Republic), explained that an Anglican orphanage based in Czechoslovakia made the acceptance of Jewish children conditional upon their baptism.<sup>29</sup> Although not all Catholic institutions made help conditional upon conversion, support for those accepted was made conditional upon Sunday attendance of church and performing other religious duties. As Robert B., who converted during the Holocaust and survived as a child in Hungary, explained:

"If I don't go to church I don't go to school. If you want to stay in school you have to obey by the rules. And if I go to church I have to go for confession every Sunday, and of course I had Latin for I don't, five days a week, while in gymnasium, and I had to learn to do the mass in Latin, and suddenly all these laws are coming out which were affecting me. So here I am a Roman Catholic but I suddenly had to wear a star."<sup>30</sup>

24 ADSS (Actes et Documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale), Vol. 8, Doc. 84, Le Secrétaire du S. Office Marchetti-Selvaggiani au nonce à Bucarest Cassulo, Nr. 402/40 (Arch. de la Nonciature 7551/41, orig.), Rome, 16 May 1941, 189-191.

25 Ion Popa, *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust*, Bloomington 2017, 33, 53-55.

26 There are some exceptions, for example: Juliana F. Holocaust Video Testimony (HVT) 3860, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library. Juliana was born in Prešov, Czechoslovakia (today Slovakia), in 1936. The family converted to Protestantism in 1942 as a means of avoiding deportation. She clearly stated that conversion helped the family avoid being sent to a concentration camp. They were sent to a labour camp instead. However, in her case, as in others, other strategies of survival were necessary later on as conversion itself was not enough to protect them.

27 Ann W., HVT 2356.

28 There is another case where villagers took a special interest in the conversion of a family but, according to the testimony, in that case they did not make help conditional on conversion. See: Klára S. HVT 4131. Klára was born in Trebišov, Czechoslovakia (today Slovakia) in 1935, the younger of two daughters. Her father was a dentist. Initially, the family was exempted from deportation due to the father's profession, but later they found shelter in a village called Staré Hory, where, at the suggestion of the priest and of the villagers, the entire family converted.

29 David K., HVT 1856.

30 Robert B., HVT 1989.

While hiding in convents or in Catholic households, many Jewish children felt persuaded to convert. Sometime there was direct pressure, while at other times the children were convinced by the context in which they were living. Often, the initiative to convert these children came from lay Catholics, but, as in the case of the villagers in Ann's testimony, the clergy also became complicit in this process. The parents of Berthe B., who was born in Paris in 1935, gave her up to a Christian woman during the Holocaust, who was paid to protect her. This woman believed that Berthe's afterlife would be in danger without baptism. However, the priest refused to perform the ceremony without the approval of the parents. Berthe was later moved to another Christian family who again wanted to baptise her, this time out of a desire to protect her. In this second situation the priest did not have any objections to baptising the child without the approval of the parents.<sup>31</sup>

In some situations, one can feel the lack of sympathy of Catholic nuns and/or teachers for the predicament brought by conversion onto the Jewish families. Rosie L. was born in Poland in 1933, but moved to Belgium and survived the Holocaust there with her family. Her parents decided to hide her and her brother in a Catholic Sisters of Charity convent. In 1943, she was 10 and her brother 7. Due to poor sanitation and lack of food the children were moved, with the help of the Belgian resistance, to a Catholic village where Rosie was "convinced" to be baptised. According to her testimony, the priest did not show any interest in having the parents' approval, although they were in contact with the children and easy to reach. When Rosie told her mother, she became very upset and started to cry. However, as Rosie explained:

"The day was like two weeks from now, and I felt like it was too late to decide not to do it, you know. I had a priest involved, I had my godfather involved, my godmother involved. How am I gonna say now, I changed my mind? I felt obligated to do it, although I had a lot of, I felt very guilty about it, I knew I was hurting my parent. I felt very guilty about it."<sup>32</sup>

Post-war testimonies and scholarship mention the tensions between convents and/or foster families and Jewish parents and/or relatives who wanted to retrieve children hidden during the Holocaust, but these aspects do not appear in the Fortunoff testimonies examined.

The involvement of religious institutions in the conversion process was not heartless all the time. The Fortunoff testimonies describe situations in which priests, either out of humanistic/Christian values or because they were paid, helped in various ways. One of the most common avenues was to forge the papers, changing the date of baptism to an earlier date to fit the requirement of various antisemitic laws.<sup>33</sup> In one case, an Orthodox priest from Belgrade married a couple in order to help the groom hide his Jewish identity. He also converted the bride, who was Catholic, to the Orthodox faith in order to perform the wedding ceremony.<sup>34</sup> Conversion in exchange for money is only mentioned explicitly in a few cases in the Fortunoff testimonies,<sup>35</sup>

31 Berthe B., HVT 2668.

32 Rosie L., HVT 2248.

33 For example, Ivan I., HVT 1325, who was born in Belgrade, spoke of an Orthodox priest who put the date of Christening at the same time as the date of birth. A similar situation can be found in the case of Manfred K., HVT-1175, who was born in Bremen. A Lutheran priest had him baptised and back-dated the baptism.

34 See: Livija A., HVT 3757.

35 Chava S., HVT 3965. Chava was born in Bratislava in 1936, the younger of two children. In her testimony, she stated that in May 1943 her father found a Greek Catholic priest "who re-baptized the family to Greek-Catholics for great money".

although we know from the case of Romania that even when Catholic priests were driven by humanistic/Christian values, some form of payment was involved.<sup>36</sup>

The wartime attitude of the Jewish leadership towards conversions to Christianity is not detailed in the 97 testimonies examined here. Thomas Brechenmacher argued that in Germany, “Jewish relief organisations, confronted with the threat to their own co-religionists, in any case hardly considered themselves responsible for these ‘non-Aryans’”.<sup>37</sup> Gherson Greenberg examined several cases of Jewish religious rulings on conversions and showed that in some cases, such as the ruling of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry of Kaunas, “he (i.e. the one who converted to Christianity) can reenter the Jewish community after performing penitent return (Teshuvah) and paying a fine”.<sup>38</sup> My previous research on conversions in Romania suggested that in Bucharest, returning to Judaism was also sometimes made conditional on penitence and a waiting period,<sup>39</sup> but these aspects are not mentioned in any of the testimonies researched here. Although most of the survivors spoke about returning to Judaism, this was a natural process, as if conversion had changed nothing. For most, returning to the community did not involve any religious authority. In a few cases, the survivors mentioned discussions with a rabbi,<sup>40</sup> but none of them implied that a special ceremony of return to Judaism was needed, not even for those who lived in Israel after the war.<sup>41</sup>

The Fortunoff testimonies confirm some of the bureaucratic aspects we already know from existing scholarship. For example, all those who offered in-depth details on the conversion process mentioned that baptism was performed only after a period of catechisation. Even in cases where everyone knew that the conversion was not genuine, the Jews had to go to catechisation classes before baptism. An important aspect missing in the testimonies is the lack of any mention of speeding up the process of conversion to Catholicism, although this is confirmed in secondary literature on Romania.<sup>42</sup> In Romania and Hungary, a Jewish individual who wanted to convert had to inform the local rabbi of their desire to leave the community.<sup>43</sup> However, there are no references to this in the testimonies examined here. Instead, the intervention of the Vatican in offering some form of protection to converts is confirmed in several testimonies, although the way survivors remembered this aspect was sometimes flawed and subjective.<sup>44</sup>

36 See: Popa, *Sanctuary from the Holocaust*, 49.

37 Thomas Brechenmacher, *The Church and the Jews*, in Karl-Joseph Hummel/Michael Kissener (ed.), *Catholics in the Third Reich. Controversies and Debates*, Leiden/Boston 2018, 135.

38 Gershon Greenberg, *Wartime Jewish Orthodoxy’s Encounter with Holocaust Christianity*, in: Kevin P. Spicer (ed.), *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust*, Bloomington 2007, 237. See also 252-260 for more such rulings.

39 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG 25.084 D15478, *Comunitatea evreilor din România [Jewish Community of Romania]*, 1941–1942, 10.

40 Nicholas P., HVT 575. Nicholas was born in Budapest in 1912. He converted as a child and survived the Holocaust in Hungary. Soon after the war, he arrived in Sweden, where he went to a rabbi in Gothenburg and told him that he wanted to be Jewish. As he put it: “I thought that I should be Jewish and completely Jewish.”

41 See for example: Chava S., HVT 3965; and Lilly G., HVT 2014. They both converted during the Holocaust and went to Israel soon after the war.

42 See: Popa, *Sanctuary from the Holocaust*, 49.

43 See: Kinga Frojimovics, *Bürokratikus időhúzás. Kikeresztelkedők és visszatérők 1938 után a Pesti Izraelita Hitközségben [Bureaucratic Dragging. Baptised and Returning after 1938 to the Pest Jewish Community]*, in: *Egyházfórum* 29 (2014) 2-3, 11-18.

44 See for example: Michael B., HVT 3796, who was born in Vienna in 1931, but moved with his parents to Budapest in 1941. His mother was Catholic, while he and his father converted in Vienna before the move to Hungary. As he recalled the help from the Vatican: “She (i.e. the mother) would go outside and went to the Vatican Embassy and pestered them until they gave her a protection letter. So we were protected by the Vatican and it was signed by the Pope. The Pope never saw it.”

## The Impact of Conversion on Jewish Identity and Belonging as Revealed in the Fortunoff Video Archive Testimonies

Conversion had a significant impact on the life and sense of belonging of the converts, even if the conversion itself was temporary.<sup>45</sup> Most survivors, who, we should not forget, were children during the war, speak of conversion in very bleak tones, as betrayal, shame, and embarrassment. Susan M., who was born in Budapest and almost converted as a small child in Hungary to avoid persecution, described her experience in these terms:

“I felt somehow that God was watching us and if anything this was gonna be the cause of our perishing, the next air raid or whatever, just because we were doing it. It was like, like being a traitor and I was always terribly ashamed. I am not ashamed of anything else associated with the Holocaust and I practically talk about anything else, but this is something I’ve always been very embarrassed about [...]”<sup>46</sup>

Peter B., who was born in Budapest in 1928, spoke about the mandatory catechisation classes and elaborated: “If I was going to survive, it was important that I have the inner sense of being Christian. I had to be the perfect actor, in a sense.” He summarised the entire experience saying: “I consider this process as really destructive. I think my soul was executed in the process of conversion; I did not feel this as a kid, but in retrospect, this is how I feel. It has taken me years to come to terms with what I did.”<sup>47</sup>

In a few cases, the experience of conversion was explicitly denied, although the recollection of events was imbued with an ostensibly glorious narrative of resistance. One such example is Susan B., born in Michalovce, Czechoslovakia (today Slovakia), in 1927. During the Holocaust, her father asked a friend who was a village priest to convert the family as a way of avoiding deportation. The priest insisted on catechisation classes and baptism. “So my father, mother, sister, and brother converted. I was an idealist and I refused to convert. But he was a very nice man, and he said that he could not make someone with such strong beliefs convert, so he just gave me the papers.” In 1949, Susan emigrated to Israel (in 1958 she moved to the USA) and maintained strong links with Judaism.<sup>48</sup> In some other cases, the grown-up survivors dismissed the importance of conversion in a desire to emphasise their Jewishness, although it is clear from the testimonies that the experience had a longstanding emotional impact. Nadia R. was born in Bratislava in 1938. She was baptised in a Protestant church when she was four. The way she retold the story of her baptismal ceremony demonstrates the internal tensions between acknowledging the importance of the event as her first memory and denying its importance:

- What does it mean? Do you mean baptism?
- Baptism, yeah, I remember it very, very clearly and that was sort of very courageous people from the, mostly Protestant, the Lutheran Church did it. [...]
- Did you have a ceremony?
- Yes, I remember the ceremony.
- What was that?

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the psychological impact of conversion on Jewish identity, see: Prot-Klinger, *Broken Identity*, 239-246.

<sup>46</sup> Susan M., HVT 537.

<sup>47</sup> Peter B., HVT 2736.

<sup>48</sup> Susan B., HVT 2008.

– Well, it was in a church. I must have been three or four, so, it was in a church and for me I don't remember synagogues before, maybe I was in one, but I don't remember. This was my first, you know, and ... it didn't make a big splash in my life at that time; it was something which I went through. Only later in life I really knew what it was all about, so no, there was no Jewish education in my life at that time and no identity I have to say.<sup>49</sup>

The internal voice of consciousness, which led many survivors to talk about conversion as betrayal, was sometimes matched by some form of outside opprobrium.<sup>50</sup> In some Jewish communities, converts were not welcomed back as they were no longer seen as Jews. This implicit pressure can be felt in the Fortunoff testimonies when the survivors tried to answer unasked questions, to minimise the importance of their conversion, or all of a sudden to bring up Israel or their involvement in Holocaust education as a way of emphasising their Jewish belonging.<sup>51</sup> In some other cases, they retold the story of attempted conversion in very glorious tones, highlighting their resistance and devotedness to Judaism.<sup>52</sup>

In the Fortunoff collection, there are examples where the different experiences of persecution during the Holocaust impacted members of the same family who had converted to Christianity differently.<sup>53</sup> Nicholas P., for example, was born in Budapest in 1912. He and his brother converted to Catholicism as children. They both survived the Holocaust, Nicholas in Hungary and his brother as a Catholic priest in Italy. Nicholas, who was persecuted in Hungary, returned to Judaism immediately after the war, while his brother, who was not affected by the Holocaust, remained a Christian. In other cases, children who were hidden in the same place experienced conversion and post-war tensions of belonging in very different ways.<sup>54</sup>

Jews who converted before or during the Holocaust in Germany and/or France generally retold the story of conversion and attachment to Christianity in more positive terms, without shadows of betrayal or embarrassment. That is probably because these communities were rather secularised. An excellent example, although not singular, is Paulette G., who was born in Paris in 1933 and was hidden during the Holocaust by a Catholic family. She described Catholicism and her experience as a convert in these terms:

“I think that, Catholicism for me stood me in good stead, it gave me a discipline, it gave some comfort, and it allowed me not to go astray somehow, you know, I had something to hold on to. This religion called Catholicism. And I had a lot of fears about things, because no one could teach me anything, so I had to teach it myself, and through religion, I think, through Catholicism, I was able to hold on to certain values and ethics that allowed me to carry on with my life, you see, because I had little else to hold on to. So, in fact it was a great help to grow up with this kind of thing, and as young adults to be able to fall back on something like this, because I did believe for a long time.”

49 Nadia R., HVT 3132.

50 See the case of Berthe B., HVT 2668, who was born in Paris in 1935. She spoke of how the Jewish community was highly critical of the fact that her parents sent her to a Catholic school.

51 See for example: Nadia R., HVT 3132.

52 See for example the case of Judith S. HVT 1263, who was born in Szeged in 1929. She explained that, when offered the possibility of conversion, her father declared: “We won't change our religion. We were born as Jews, we will die as Jews if we have to. The religion is not a coat that you can change with the season.”

53 Nicholas P., HVT 575.

54 See the joint testimony of Jacques F., David I., and Paul S. HVT 1792. They were hidden in a Belgian village, but they did not know about each other until after the war. They remembered conversion and relations to various Catholic individuals in significantly different ways.

Paulette was also open during the interview about her continued belief in Christianity after the war and the dilemmas of identity raised by this reality:

“You know, my belief in Christianity did not stop when the war ended. It continued on for a long, long time. And my identity crisis as a Jew and as a Christian was very difficult. And it began to take shape after I married my husband who was an American Jewish man. And so it was a conflict, a great crisis up until that point. Was I a Jew, was I a Christian? And when I met my husband I finally found a peaceful way to resolve that problem. It was quite comfortable being a Jew again.”<sup>55</sup>

There are a few other Fortunoff testimonies expressing the same attachment to Christianity. Denise B., who was born in Paris in 1934, said: “One of the nuns began to give me private lessons on Catholicism. I became very attached to Virgin Mary. I began to pray fervently because I thought that this would bring my mother back. [...] Catholicism helped me to think straight, my mind was such a blur.”<sup>56</sup> Henri B., who was born in Paris in 1927 and baptised in a Catholic church while in hiding with his mother and siblings in a little village outside Paris, was also appreciative of the structure Christian belief and ritual gave him: “I told you before that I was very religious. It kept me occupied during my entire deportation, I always prayed. I think it helped me. When you get beaten, and then say ‘forgive them, they know not what they do,’ perhaps it changes something. It also imposed rules on me, things I did or did not do.”<sup>57</sup> Usually, the attachment was rather to Christianity as an idea. Only in a few cases, such as those of Hans Frei (HVT 170) and Walter Ziffer (HVT 1475), who became committed Christian theologians/pastors, was the attachment more than that, as they expressed a clear commitment to the religious/ritual tenets of their respective denominations.

In several situations, as in the case of Paulette G. discussed above, Fortunoff survivors who converted during the Holocaust were rather willing to make peace with their hybrid identities. This was also the case with Hans Frei, who was born in Breslau, Germany (today Wrocław in Poland), in 1922. His parents converted to Christianity in their early adulthood and Hans was baptised at birth. In 1938, the entire family emigrated to the US. After the war, Hans Frei became a prestigious Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School. Although his case is different in many respects (see Hans Frei’s annotated edition on the Fortunoff Video Archive of Holocaust testimonies website for more details), he expressed the same dilemmas about identity and belonging:

“The problem really for me is that I am far more than a good many other people at once an outsider to Jewishness and an insider [...]. And yet I think I find in that book (i.e. Saul Friedlander, *When memory comes*), I found part of the same vein. A kind of inability to get two halves of his personality together again, except in a very tenuous way. Well, that’s true for me too.”<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The Fortunoff video archive provides a great array of testimonies from survivors who converted to Christianity before, during, or, in a very few instances, after the Holocaust. They were interviewed in different locations in the USA, Canada, Europe, and Israel. As a result, we have not only a large number of testimonies, but a

<sup>55</sup> Paulette G., HVT 2170.

<sup>56</sup> Denise B., HVT 2172.

<sup>57</sup> Henri B., HVT 2154.

<sup>58</sup> Hans F., HVT 170.

wealth of information about the ways in which the Holocaust and conversions were experienced in many European countries. The testimonies provide valuable information on antisemitic policies in these countries, but also on the attitudes of religious institutions and individuals towards Jews and on the effect of conversion on the life and belonging of the survivors.

Apart from the wealth of historical details, some of them probably missed because of the large number of testimonies looked at in a short time (and this is a strong argument for a closer look at this source, especially in light of the new online platform that is being implemented by the Fortunoff Video Archive), the aspect really standing out is the fascinating insight these sources offer on the impact of conversion on Jewish lives, identities, and belonging. The attachment of Jews who converted to the Christian community in particular has been easily dismissed and needs further, more insightful exploration.<sup>59</sup>

Yaakov Ariel pointed out that conversions during and after the Holocaust “involved massive formations of identities weaving elements together in new reconfigurations”. This process was not without pain, on the contrary: In comparison to many human beings who went through their lives without being much concerned about their “identities”, Jews who converted to Christianity had to adapt, to learn skills in assuming new identities, to reinvent and reconfigure themselves constantly, “to recreate and plant themselves successfully, albeit not without pain, in new and often hostile communal and spiritual territories”.<sup>60</sup>

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59 Ariel, *From Faith to Faith*, 42-46.

60 *Ibid.*, 65-66.

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