

“VWI goes to the Koordinierungsausschuss für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit“

Wednesday, 22 May 2019, 6.00 pm
Koordinierungsausschuss für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit
Tandelmartgasse 5/2-4, 1020 Wien

Ion POPA

CONVERSION AND IDENTITY

EXPERIENCES OF JEWS WHO CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY BEFORE AND DURING THE HOLOCAUST



Research into the attitude of Churches towards Jews during the Holocaust, which has grown steadily in the last ten years, has shown the extent of Jews' conversions as a way of avoiding persecution and death in countries such as France, Poland, Belgium, Hungary, and Romania. In Romania, for example, the country with the third-largest Jewish community before the Holocaust, a 1942 census revealed that 4.631 out of 272.573 Jews were converts to Christianity. Moreover, despite a March 1941 ban on conversions, at least 2008 Jews converted from 1941 to 1943, most of them to Catholicism. In France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Poland the practice was used by both Catholic and Protestant local churches. Conversions in Catholic countries were often engulfed in controversies, as Jewish children who took shelter in monasteries or Catholic households were forcefully

converted. During the Hungarian crisis of 1944, false baptismal certificates were issued as a way of helping Jews threatened with deportation.

Although we now know more about the attitude of Churches towards conversion and converted Jews, we still lack basic knowledge about the reaction of Jewish religious authorities on this matter and about converts' experiences during the Holocaust. This is in part due to a lack of available post-war testimonies of Holocaust survivors who converted to Christianity. From this point of view, the Fortunoff Video Archive, located at Yale University, is an excellent source of documentation, as it contains over 70 testimonies of such Jews. This presentation will detail the way in which experiences of conversion appear in this extraordinary resource, and provide tentative answers to some of the following questions: How were Jewish converts treated by the Jewish community and by the Christian Churches during the Holocaust? What were the identity dilemmas they faced during this period? Could they return back to Judaism and, if so, under what circumstances?

Commented by Eleonore LAPPIN-EPPEL

Ion Popa is currently a Fortunoff Research Fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies and an Honorary Research Fellow of the Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Manchester. His book *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 2018) was the co-winner of the 2018 Yad Vashem International Prize for Holocaust Research.

Eleonore Lappin-Eppel is senior researcher at the Institute for Cultural Sciences and Theater History at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She is director of the project *Responses to Persecution: Documenting Life and Destruction in the Holocaust*. Recent Publications: Dieter Hecht/Eleonore Lappin-Eppel/Michaela Raggam-Blesch, *Topographie der Shoah. Gedächtnisorte an das zerstörte jüdische Wien*, ²Vienna 2018; Gerald Lamprecht/Eleonore Lappin-Eppel/Ulrich Wyrwa (ed.), *Jewish Soldiers in the Collective Memory of Central Europe. The Remembrance of World War I from a Jewish Perspective*, Vienna et.al. 2019.

Please register at anmeldung@vwi.ac.at by latest Tuesday, 21 May, 12.00 am and bring your ID.

The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) is funded by: