

The Convent Children

The Rescue of Jewish Children in Polish Convents During the Holocaust¹

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The rescue of Jewish children in convents during the Holocaust is a subject that evokes intense emotions and sensitivities among both Jews and Christians, as it is intertwined with the controversial issue of the attitude of the Church toward the Jews at that time. The Jewish collective consciousness associates the affair with the conversion of many of these children to Christianity—as if their rescuers effected their deliverance in order to stalk innocent souls and exploit their existential distress for missionary motives. Christians, in contrast, consider the very hint of such a suspicion as an expression of ingratitude on the part of people who do not respect the death-defying devotion and Christian conscience of those priests and nuns who risked their lives in order to save Jews. It is a complex issue that penetrates to the depths of the soul.

This article examines the case of the children who survived the Holocaust in the convents of Poland. Poland is, of course, one of the largest Catholic countries in Europe and one in which the Church had a special stature and exerted strong influence over its believers.

Convents in Occupied Poland

Catholic Poland, flanked by the mostly Orthodox Russia to the east and predominantly Lutheran Germany to the west, was peppered until World War II with sundry types of convents and monasteries. These were mostly tenanted by women, and even the Church establishment was not always well acquainted with all of them. According to Jerzy Kłoczowski, forty-four church orders and 350 monasteries were active in Poland on the eve of World War II, with a population of 6,430 monks; thirty-four communities of nuns maintained

¹ This article is part of a book in progress on the rescue of children with assumed identities in Poland.

2,300 institutions in which 22,000 nuns served.² These figures diminished steeply during World War II because both the Germans and the Soviets invoked occupation policies that aimed to undermine the Catholic Church, the bastion of Polish nationalism. In the western districts of Poland, annexed to the Third Reich after the occupation, the Germans applied a policy of Germanization in which convents were closed and Polish nuns were placed under constraints in their interaction with the inhabitants. The eastern regions, controlled by Russia until World War I, had few Catholic monasteries to begin with. In 1939-1941, the Soviet authorities shuttered most of those that did exist and dispersed their monks and nuns, or exiled them to Siberia.

The monasteries and convents in Poland were organized in orders and communities, and they filled an important social function in both education and welfare. Every holy order had its own goals, *regula*, habit, tradition, and customs. In terms of status, monks and nuns belong to the Church elite but, in contrast to priests, do not answer directly to the regular Church hierarchy (which is based on ranks of bishops). Every monastic order has its own source of authorities—whether in Poland, Rome or elsewhere. Even before the war, the activities of the Polish monasteries and convents were neither coordinated by nor centralized under any particular authority. Such was the case *a fortiori* during the war, when these institutions had to fend for themselves and discharge their missions as their personnel and resources best permitted. This state of affairs affected the convent leadership's decisions regarding the rescue of Jewish children.³

With few exceptions, only female orders that engaged in education and welfare participated in rescuing Jews. Most convents of this sort administered orphanages or residential schools for girls of two substantively distinct types. Residential convents, especially those in the large cities, were originally meant for “good girls” from affluent homes who attended gymnasias or vocational schools, paid for their room and board, and lived under the nuns' supervision. The Immaculate order (Niepokalanki), for example, devoted itself

² Jerzy Kłoczowski, “The Religious Orders and the Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland,” *Polin*, A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies, vol. 3 (1988), p. 238.

³ Ewa Kurek-Lesik, *Gdy Klasztor znaczył życie* (Warsaw: Znak, 1992), pp. 49-54. An English edition of this book was recently published: *Your Life Is Worth Mine* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1997).

chiefly to educational work; its nuns taught in primary schools and gymnasia and had a residence that accommodated a small number of pupils. When the war caused social needs to escalate, the Immaculate sisters branched into welfare activities among additional population groups. It was under these circumstances that Jewish girls, among others, found their way to the Immaculate institutions.⁴

The orphanage convents, in contrast, were deployed countrywide—in cities, suburbs, and rural areas—and were meant for children from the impoverished classes, homeless orphans, and foundlings from the lowest socioeconomic groups in the Christian population. Although convents of this type were ostensibly open to any child in need of shelter, their capacity was limited. During the war the population of caretaker-less orphans multiplied, and a new population group took shape: children of refugee parents who could not support them. Together, these groups brought the convents to full occupancy. The standard of living in these convents, meager even in ordinary times, declined steadily during the occupation as the state stopped subsidizing them. Only a few homes, which charged for their services, offered reasonable living conditions. The other convents had to make do with modest allocations from the RGO (*Rada Główna Opiekuńcza*, the Central Welfare Board), which operated under authorization from the Germans.

Among these convents, too, there were differences. Conditions in convents that did not lose their facilities were not overly grim because they retained their pre-war equipment, furniture, and clothing. In other convents, however, life was unbearably harsh. One example is the Convent of the Sacred Heart (Sercanki), located in Przemyśl, Galicia. The convent, established during the war with assistance from the RGO, admitted youngsters from the vicinity and from Wolhynia, in eastern Poland, who had fled the Ukrainian terror. Living conditions in this convent were extremely difficult—rampant starvation, no electricity, contagious diseases, a grave shortage of medicines, and no possibility of delousing.⁵ Similar conditions

⁴ Ewa Kurek-Lesik, *Udział Żeńskich Zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci Żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939-1945, część, II, Źródła i opracowania* (Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, 1988), p. 125. I have made use of several of the many testimonies in this Ph.D. dissertation (hereafter: *Kurek-Lesik Collection*).

⁵ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Miriam Klein, pp. 188-189.

prevailed in the large Turkowice convent, an older institution. The Turkowice convent was situated in the middle of a forest in a remote rural area near Lublin. Its buildings were not damaged in the war, but sanitary conditions were rudimentary in the extreme. The children rarely took hot baths. Neither soap nor medicine was available. Those known to have contracted contagious illnesses were quarantined under a nun's supervision in an isolation room, but since there was no physician to examine the children regularly, the ill could not always be identified.⁶

Although the convents were situated in various parts of the country and were different both in appearance and in their standard of living, their internal format retained several common features—for example, the regimen, living routine, and method of education. The most salient feature of almost every convent was its outside wall, which isolated the institution from its immediate surroundings and served as a buffer between its internal affairs and the external secular milieu. The convent interior was divided functionally into wings: a pupils' residential wing with dormitory halls, dozens of pupils packed into each on the basis of age groups; a separate isolated wing for the nuns; and a service wing including dining hall, kitchen, storage areas, offices, halls or rooms for social activities, and, if the convent had an internal school, classrooms. The best-appointed facility in each convent was the chapel.

The more affluent convents had a reception hall where pupils could meet with relatives who visited them on occasion. Several convents on the outskirts of towns and villages had small auxiliary farms where a few chickens and pigs were raised and, if a parcel of land was available, where fruit or vegetables were grown. The produce from these farms was an important supplement to the RGO's scanty allocations. Luxuries were altogether absent, but enough resources were available to fend off starvation.

The convent staff was composed of the mother superior, who made all important decisions, and a team of nuns—usually between five and fifteen in number, depending on the mission and enrollment of the convent. Each convent had its own priest, who administered over the worship services in the convent chapel and heard confession for nuns and pupils. Several nuns were

⁶ *Dzieci Holocaustu Mówią*, (Warszawa: Nakładem Stowarzyszenia Dzieci Holocaustu w Polsce, 1993), p. 113.

educators and teachers; they sometimes called on secular teachers, older pupils, or acolytes for assistance. Other nuns discharged administrative duties and ran the service facilities, kitchen, infirmary, and auxiliary farm. The pupils helped run the convent in mundane ways and took turns in performing various duties. With the farm chores, which required greater skill, the staff was assisted by secular workers who, too, lived within the convent walls.

Before the war, about 400 convents across Poland had institutions for children. As stated above, some of them were disbanded during the occupation and a few were established during the war to meet urgent needs in the care of war orphans. As the war dragged on, the convents became full to capacity. In March 1940, for example, the Turkowice convent—one of the large, remote convents in Poland, far from the main roads—admitted children sent from Warsaw by the RGO. Afterward it continued to accept children from the vicinity, mostly from Polish families whom the Germans had deported from the area of Zamość. In 1942, the convent housed 350 children aged six months to fifteen years.⁷ Under such circumstances, the principle of “charity begins at home” obviously came into play; the rescue of Jewish children was not foremost among the convent leaders’ concerns.

Of course, the convents had never interrelated with Jews, whose plight in the ghettos did not affect them. It is also worth bearing in mind that sheltering Jewish children placed all Christian inhabitants of the convent in mortal danger and required them to share their scanty provisions.

Rescue of Children in Convents—From a Jewish Perspective

Notably, the available Jewish sources do not attest to a flood of Jewish parents who pounded on the convent doors to save their children at any price. Indeed, one can hardly point to a starker contrast and dichotomy than Polish Jews and Catholic convents, the embodiments of Christendom. Testimonies of nuns occasionally mention Jewish children who spent time in convents before the war, but a painstaking review of these sources shows that this occurred only in exceptional and marginal cases of unwanted children, mostly born out of wedlock or to mixed couples. When the ghettos were established

⁷ Cezary Gawryś, “Turkowice — śmierć i ocalenie,” *WIEŻ*, 4:342 (1987), pp. 13-14.

after the occupation, the German authorities ordered the convents to return these children to the Jewish community.⁸

The Jewish public awakened to the possibility of rescuing children in convents at a later stage, as the genocidal liquidation of the ghettos was under way and all alternatives had failed. Even then, few Jews seemed willing to save their children by entrusting them to these bastions of Christianity. The writings of Emanuel Ringelblum inform us that the issue was publicly debated in the Warsaw ghetto in early December 1942, after the great deportation. It was evidently Irena Sendler of Żegota, an organization established by Polish Catholics in the autumn of 1942 to assist Jews, who proposed that several hundred children aged ten and over be saved by placement in convents at a charge of 8,000 złoty per year, remitted in advance.⁹ According to the plan, the children's whereabouts would be recorded in a card file so they could be reclaimed at the end of the war.

It should be noted that despite the harsh conditions in the Warsaw ghetto - the largest ghetto in Poland, already on the verge of extinction - those who heard about this plan greeted it with suspicion and objected to it for three reasons. The first had to do with proselytizing; some suspected the Catholic clergy *a priori* of wanting to exploit the Jews' agonies in order to convert their children. The second was material; they suspected that by demanding payment up front the convents were looking to make "a good deal." The third reason concerned prestige. Up to then, the Polish priesthood had done very little to rescue Jews. Now, by saving several hundred children, it would buy itself a seal of approval, proving that it had not sat idly by during that difficult time and ostensibly had spared no effort to rescue Jews generally and Jewish children specifically.¹⁰

The plan was discussed among the ghetto's public figures and was rejected in view of the opposition of Orthodox and nationalist circles. Several

⁸ Magdalena Kaczmarzyk, *Pomoc udzielana Żydom przez Zgromadzenie Sióstr Albertynek w czasie II wojny Światowej*, p. 1; Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), JM 3636; Kurek-Lesik, *Gdy Klasztor znaczył życie*, pp. 57-58.

⁹ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Last Writings; Polish-Jewish Relations*, January 1943-April 1944 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1994), pp. 245-246; Yonas Turkow, "On the Rescue of Children from the Warsaw Ghetto," Pages in *Research of the Holocaust and the Uprising* (Hebrew), Collection A (1969), pp. 259-263.

¹⁰ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: September 1939-December 1942* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1992), pp. 434-435.

well-heeled Orthodox personalities who were asked to fund the upkeep of the children opposed the plan categorically: “We won’t let our children be handed over to convents for spiritual destruction,” they said. “Let them share the fate that God has ordained for us.”¹¹

However, not only were the Orthodox opposed. The intellectuals who debated the plan, including pronouncedly secular participants such as Ringelblum himself, expressed their doubts out of concern for the children’s future identity. Time and education, they said, would make their inroads; sooner or later, notwithstanding the priests’ assurances to the contrary, the children would become Christian. One of the participants believed that in this case they should follow the precedent of previous generations and choose martyrdom:

“We must not acquiesce in the spiritual destruction of our children. The public must not get involved in this. Let us leave the decision to each individual. If more than 300,000 Jews are to be annihilated in Warsaw, what is the use of saving several hundred children? Let them perish or survive together with the entire community. “

Some participants, however, opposed this extreme view, arguing that the rescue action should be taken to assure the future of the Jewish people; as all of European Jewry was being annihilated, every Jewish soul should be protected. If a handful of Jewish children were transferred to the Aryan side, they maintained, a core group for the next generation of Jewry would be saved. That generation’s right to live should not be negated, even if a few children are influenced by the priesthood. Several discussants favored accepting the offer in the conviction that the most important task was to save as many Jews as possible. Others adopted the plan, but believed it should not bear the approval of representatives of the Jewish public. Instead, they said, parents and their children should act for themselves.¹²

Be this as it may, the institutionalized rescue of several hundred children from the Warsaw ghetto was but a potential plan that did not come to fruition

¹¹ Turkow, “*Rescue of Children*,” p. 261.

¹² Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 435.

because of the many difficulties it involved. Foremost among them was the Polish priesthood's scanty interest in the rescue of Jewish children.¹³

Jan Dobraczynski, then the head of the Division for Abandoned Children at the Warsaw municipal welfare department and a man who did much to help Żegota activists place Jewish children in convents, later said that he had learned of the debate in the ghetto only from Ringelblum's writings. He recalled having encountered outside the ghetto a representative of the Jewish committee who had introduced himself as "Dr. Marek." "Marek" thanked Dobraczynski for acting to rescue Jewish children by placing them in convents and then took up the question of their being baptized into the Church. Dobraczynski explained that this was being done for their safety. When "Marek" continued to press, asking about the children's disposition after the war, Dobraczynski replied that their parents or relatives would make this decision if they survived; if not, the youngsters would be raised as Catholics until they reached adulthood and would then decide for themselves. "Those are tough terms," answered "Marek," who had no choice but to accept them.¹⁴

Concurrently, the rescue of children in convents was debated in a different context and a different setting—the young people who led the Gordonia youth movement in the Warsaw ghetto. Before Sarah Erlichman (Sojka) of Gordonia embarked on underground activity as a liaison officer, she wished to arrange shelter for her younger sister, twelve-year-old Justynka. Eliezer Geller, her comrade in Gordonia, suggested that Justynka be sent as the leader of a group of little girls to a convent in Częstochowa. Several major movement members began to debate the matter. Some objected to Geller's proposal, arguing that it might rescue the children physically but would forsake their souls to the priests' zealous education. Here, too, the issue ended with a debate and nothing more, because the circumstances precluded implementation.¹⁵ Jewish families in other ghettos also discussed the matter.

Jews had good reason to distrust the intentions of the Polish priesthood and to flinch from recourse to this path of rescue. Even the non-religious, even on the verge of extermination, hesitated to seek to save their children by

¹³ Ringelblum, *Last Writings*, p. 246.

¹⁴ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Jan Dobraczynski, pp. 331-332.

¹⁵ Sarah Erlichman-Bank, *In the Hands of the Impure* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1976), pp. 92-93.

placing them under the shadow of the Catholic cross. The matter had its historical roots. It is true that the Polish priesthood opposed forcible conversion of Jews at the time, since Christianity does not allow itself to be foisted upon persons unwilling to embrace it. This is not the case, however, with respect to children. In eighteenth-century Poland, many Jewish children had been abducted and baptized without their parents' consent, and such cases were reported even in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁶

An unbearably daunting question for a religious Jew is whether to save a life at the cost of conversion. According to religious law, all prohibitions in the 613 obligatory commandments are null and void when life is at issue. Only with respect to three commandments must death be preferred over violation: idolatry or conversion, incest, and murder. Medieval Jewish terminology actually lauded martyrs, i.e., those who chose suicide to avoid the acceptance of Christianity. Thus, the historical roots of martyrdom were deeply planted in the consciousness of European Jewry.¹⁷

When the eldest son of Rabbi Ezekiel Lewin, chief rabbi of Lvov before the war, informed his mother that the Uniate Metropolitan, Archbishop Andreas Szeptycki, was willing to rescue him and his two younger brothers and had promised not to convert them, she did not even wish to hear of the matter. She was convinced that by abandoning her children to the priests she would consign them to Christianity, and she did not consider herself entitled to purchase the physical lives of her children, the offspring of rabbis, at the price of their spiritual destruction. After further entreaties, she agreed to meet with the Archbishop, who assured her repeatedly that her children would not forget their faith and people. His promises were of no use. Some time later, before the murder *Aktion*, her son returned to the ghetto and informed her that the head of the Studite order, Father General Kliment Szeptycki—the Metropolitan's brother—had promised to spare no effort to rescue her along with her youngest son and pleaded with her to accept this path to deliverance. She refused:

¹⁶ Yaakov Goldberg, *Out-Converts in the Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1985), pp. 34-39.

¹⁷ Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, *On Jewish History in the Middle Ages* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved), 1958, pp. 174-184.

“I will have no part of it. . . . I am not entitled to do what others may. The Metropolitan’s promises are nice, but the matter of spiritual destruction will eventually become very real. I have no doubt that you will remain loyal to Judaism and try to keep your brother Nathan Jewish. But if I place your little brother, who is still a baby, in [their] custody, who will assure me that he will not leave the congregation of Israel? I adhere to my decision: the boy and I will remain in the ghetto. If we are granted the privilege of staying alive, all the better, and if not, we will go where your father has gone.”

The younger brother was shot in January 1943, in the *Kinderaktion* in the Lvov ghetto; the mother was murdered in the Janowski camp in September 1943.¹⁸

Rabbi David Kahane, also of Lvov, found shelter in Metropolitan Szeptycki’s palace and survived. He has testified to debates at the time about whether to entrust children to the convents after rabbis had been consulted in the matter. Most of the rabbis favored the move, believing that, if the children survived, someone would remove them from the convents and return them to the fold. Several rabbis, however, believed it preferable for the children to die with the rest of their families and their people than to be placed in a convent. Rabbi Kahane considered it the highest duty to save the children’s lives¹⁹ and followed through on his conviction by placing his young daughter in a convent. She survived the Holocaust with her mother, who had found refuge in a Uniate institution under Metropolitan Szeptycki.

The Path from Ghetto to Convent

In addition to the parents’ vacillations, very few Jews—even those who had assimilated and had immersed themselves in Christian society—had direct access to convents. Therefore, those willing to enroll their children in such institutions had to ask Christian mediators for assistance, or abandon their children at the convent threshold in the hope that the nuns would take them in.

¹⁸ Yitzhak Levin, *I Immigrated [to Palestine] from Specje* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1947), pp. 128-129, 149-150.

¹⁹ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Rabbi David Kahane, pp. 344-347.

Max Noy of Otwock made the acquaintance of Sister Ludwika Małkiewicz of the Elizabethan sisters' convent in Świder when the nun visited the furniture warehouse where he worked and asked him for a few beds for the convent. He answered in the affirmative, and in the course of the transaction the two of them formed a friendship. In 1942, before the ghetto was liquidated, Noy contacted Sister Ludwika and asked her to save his young daughter. The nun took up the matter with the mother superior, Gertruda Marciniak, who expressed her consent. The nuns prepared a forged Christian birth certificate for the girl and conspired with her parents to stage her abandonment. That evening the mother slipped into the convent clutching the girl and left her in the corridor. Tied around the youngster's neck was a small bag containing the forged birth certificate and a letter explaining that her mother could no longer support her because of her economic plight and requesting that she be admitted to the convent. The mother walked away; her daughter, alone, burst into tears; and the nuns came out and brought her in.²⁰

This staged abandonment does not attest to some standard operating procedure but to the difficulties that Jewish parents faced even when they wished to place their children in convents. Even though the convent agreed to receive the girl, the matter was not arranged overtly and directly.

As the ghettos faced liquidation, the number of children being referred to convents grew. All strata of Jewish society, from the assimilated to the ultra-Orthodox, were involved. The ways the children reached the convents were, of course, diverse, but, in general, they fell into two main groups. One group was composed of children whose parents took the initiative in placing their children either by means of Polish welfare institutions such as Żegota or through Christian mediators. The children's upkeep was covered by payments forwarded to the convents either by the welfare agencies or by the parents, who were hiding somewhere on the "Aryan" side and who used mediators to forward the money. In such cases, the mediators became the children's custodians. As such, posing as relatives, they visited the children in the convents every now and then and kept them in touch with their parents in hiding. Sometimes their mothers or surviving relatives, without disclosing their

²⁰ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimonies of Ludwika Małkiewicz and Max Noy, pp. 36-50.

kinship to the convent staff, visited the children and asked about their well-being. Convents shouldered the expense of the children's upkeep only when their parents and relatives perished, leaving no one to tender payment. In any case, we do not know if convents ever evicted children merely because their maintenance payments had stopped.

The other group was composed of children who had reached convents at random and in ways other than through their parents' initiative. Some of them were very young—infants and toddlers who had been separated from their parents and abandoned; compassionate Christians gathered them in and delivered them to the nearest convent. The parents of quite a few of these abandoned children had turned them over to Christian families for sheltering; although they paid for this service, the benefactors pocketed the money and rid themselves of the children by deserting them in the street. Compassionate passersby directed them to a convent or led them there personally. Older girls, aged twelve to fourteen, also pounded on convent doors, as did girls who had been roving about in villages and working for peasants until their daily difficulties and their employers' abuse prompted them to seek shelter in convents. Some of these children reached and were admitted to the convents in very dramatic ways. Accordingly, the experience left an indelible mark on them, especially the older ones, and had a profound influence on their lives in the convent and the relations they formed with the sisters.²¹

Did the Convents Rescue as a Policy?

Can the convents' willingness to admit Jewish children, as reflected in numerous testimonies, be defined as a deliberate rescue policy? Not necessarily.

Above all, however, the mortal risk to the rescuers in the rescue of Jewish children cannot be overemphasized. It transcended the nuns' vows, and no religious authority instructed the convents to engage in these actions. Among the many testimonies taken by Kurek-Lesik in convents in the 1980s, in

²¹ Concerning the way Jewish children reached the convents, see the following testimonies: YVA, 03/3410, Aliza Penski 03/5568, Yonah Altshuler; Leah Fried-Blumenkranz, "Lilka—the Convent Girl," *EduT*, 10 (1994), pp. 74-76; *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, testimony of Sister Zofia Makowska, pp. 64-66; and testimony of Sister Ambilis Filipowicz, p. 119; Irit R. Kuper, *At the Edge of the Forest* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1977), pp. 115-116.

advance of her study on rescued children, only one respondent, a mother superior, reported having consulted with a bishop about whether to rescue a Jewish girl—a query that he answered in the affirmative.²²

In occupied countries in Western Europe, such as Belgium and France, the Germans left the Church and its hierarchy unharmed and intact. During the occupation, this hierarchy actually gained strength at the expense of the political establishment, which had collapsed.²³ In Poland, in contrast, the Germans had no qualms about attacking the Church hierarchy, which they considered part of the national elite. By destroying the Church's central administration and isolating it from the outside world, they undermined the bishops' control of their flock.²⁴ Polish priests and monks who were suspected of aiding persecuted Jews faced the death penalty as did ordinary Poles; their clerical frocks gave them no immunity. In addition, the senior Polish priesthood was hostile toward the Jews—an attitude well known before the war,²⁵ which, unfortunately, underwent no fundamental change during the occupation.²⁶

In Western Europe, the Germans' genocidal behavior awakened the Christian conscience of leading clerics, who instructed the institutions, monasteries, and convents under their control to open their gates and shelter fugitive Jews, especially children.²⁷ In Poland, in contrast, the high-ranking clergy preferred to leave the matter to the discretion of each parish priest and mother superior. Thus, in most cases, the decision to admit a Jewish child into a convent was left to the mother superior, who acted as her conscience and the admission capacity of her convent dictated.

Once the children were admitted, mothers superior made efforts to keep the secret to themselves lest somebody on their staff denounce their presence to the Germans. Sometimes they shared the secret with several nuns—mainly

²² *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Sister Roberta Sutkowska, pp. 80-92.

²³ Mark Van Den Wijngaert, "The Belgian Catholics and the Jews During the German Occupation, 1940-1944," in Dan Michman, ed., *Belgium and the Holocaust, Jews Belgians Germans* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1998), p. 225.

²⁴ Jozef Garlinski, *Poland in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 60-75.

²⁵ Celia S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction, The Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), pp. 109-114.

²⁶ *Sprawozdanie Kościelne z Polski za Czerwca i Polowe Lipca 1941*, YVA, 025/85.

²⁷ Luc Dequeker, "Baptism and Conversion of Jews in Belgium, 1939-1945," in Michman, ed., *Belgium and the Holocaust*, pp. 235-272; Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 270-279.

the children's direct caregivers—so they would know how to behave if the youngsters' true identity caused problems. For the most part, the children's appearance or behavior gave them away; in other cases, children themselves admitted their Jewishness because they could no longer endure the psychological burden of living with a dual identity under the pressure of convent life.

However, some convents took rescue actions on the basis of what may be defined as a dictated policy. Examples were the Uniate convents of the Studite order in Eastern Galicia, which accepted the authority of Archbishop Andreas Szeptycki,²⁸ and, on a larger scale, the convents of the Franciscan Sisters' of the Franciscans, one of the largest orders active in Poland. Following the instructions of their mother general, Ludwika Lisówna, and the provincial mother superior of the Warsaw area, Matylda Getter, the nuns opened their convents to Jews—adults and children alike. According to Church data, based on testimonies collected from nuns who had been involved in the rescue work, thirty-five convents of the Congregation of Sisters of the Family of Mary, part of the Franciscan order—five in Warsaw, three in Lvov, and the rest elsewhere in Poland—took part in rescuing children.²⁹ Like the Franciscan Sisters', the Grey Ursuline nuns acted on the basis of orders from above. Their rescue actions for children were coordinated by the mother general, Pia Leśniewska, who maintained contact with Żegota activists from her headquarters in the "Grey House" in Warsaw.³⁰

It may be misleading to use the expression "dictated policy" in this context, because actually even convents that were instructed to admit Jewish children received this message in the form of a recommendation, not an order. Since such actions endangered the rest of the convent inhabitants, the ultimate decision was left to the discretion of the local mother superior. She also had to take the housing capacity of the convent into account. However, there is no doubt that an instruction from a higher authority carried much weight with the

²⁸ David Kahane, *Lvov Ghetto Diary* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), p. 142; Levin, *Specje*, pp. 174-175.

²⁹ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, pp. 158-159; Ewa *Kurek-Lesik*, "The Conditions of Admittance and the Social Background of Jewish Children Saved by Women's Religious Orders in Poland from 1939-1945," *Polin*, vol. 3 (1988), pp. 246-247.

³⁰ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Sister Andrzejka Górka, p. 296.

nuns, as they were accustomed to obeying their superiors. This was especially true when they were undecided.³¹ Ultimately, this was reflected in the number of children whom these convents admitted. It is for good reason that the Franciscan Sisters' are credited with the largest number of Jewish children saved.³²

Jewish Children in the Convent

Those unfamiliar with the Catholic world and its realities and those who have never visited a convent in any significant way picture the convent as an institution swathed in mystery and splendor that immerses inquisitive outsiders in an aura of holy awe. The main origin of this sensation is the convents' reluctance to reveal anything of themselves to strangers. Those who enter a convent and study their living arrangements, customs, and patterns do discover corners and moments of splendor and awe, but in the main they find a grey, bleak reality, foremost in the inhabitants' psychological hardships. Convent life has been researched extensively; works of fiction and nonfiction on the subject would fill many a shelf. Here, however, we are merely focusing on the special problems of Jewish children who were placed in convents as fugitives from the death that awaited them outside.

To understand the experiences these Jewish children underwent, one must familiarize oneself with the convent way of life. The convent regimen and the relationship between nuns and pupils are often adulterated with elements that seem strange to those unversed in the convent reality—kindness, mercy, and toughness, sometimes accompanied by eruptions of violence. All of these were experienced within a rigid hierarchical system of submissive wards dependent on their superiors' mercies. The convent education system is based wholly on religion and traces its origins to an age-old tradition familiar not only in Poland but in convents throughout the Catholic world.

The children's convents were residential, and the children were organized in education groups by age. The nun in charge of each group, sometimes

³¹ Ewa Kurek-Lesik, "Jewish Children Saved by Women's Religious Orders," pp. 246-247.
³² Kurek-Lesik Collection, pp. 158-159.

aided by older and more veteran pupils, instructed her charges in rules that govern all activities in life.

Newly arrived children were placed in the appropriate age group. At first, they were acclimated to order and discipline, taught the rules of chastity—how to dress, undress, and bathe without exposing their bodies—and instructed strictly to discharge their duties in accordance with the schedule of convent activity. The rules of discipline in the convent were rigid; violators faced penalties.

Certain convents still applied humiliating corporal punishments for breaches of discipline: slapping, kneeling on beans for hours, and public lashings on the posterior.³³

The convent held regular and uninterrupted activity during daytime hours, with an intermingling of devotional and secular matters. The day began with matins in the convent chapel and ended with vespers before bedtime. Between these services, the children engaged in study, prayer, chores, and a small amount of leisure. The activities were interrupted by meals, over which grace was said. Below is an example of an ordinary day's schedule at the orphanage in Czernsk, a convent of the Sisters Servants of Pleszew (Służebniczki Pleszewski):

- 7:00: Wake up, bathe, put rooms in order, and take morning exercise.
- 8:00-9:00: Matins and breakfast.
- 9:00-12:00: Study.
- 12:00-13:00: Lunch and washing dishes.
- 13:00-14:00: Afternoon rest.
- 14:00-15:30: Arts and crafts.
- 15:30-18:30: Chores by rotation.
- 18:30-19:00: Supper.
- 19:00: Vespers and bedtime.³⁴

It is the declared function of convents to make their wards into good, loyal Christians by educating them in the spirit of the Christian faith. Accordingly,

³³ Testimony of Magdalena Orner, YVA, 03/6745; testimony of Aliza Penski, *ibid.*, 03/3410; *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, testimony of A. S., pp. 106-115.
³⁴ *Kurek-Lesik*, *Gdy Klasztor znaczył życie*, p. 84.

apart from elitist residences, convent educational institutions provided their pupils with no intellectual stimulation; formal studies in school played a secondary role only. In any case, such was the situation during the war. When convents had schools, the children attended them. In rural convents that lacked schools, the children performed chores in the convents and seasonal work with peasants in return for food. Since the religious atmosphere was the most important element of convent life, even amidst educational activity the children not only learned devotional songs and engaged in prayer but also listened as the nuns showered them with stories about saints, the miracles they had wrought, and the life of Jesus. Worship of Mary, especially well developed in the convents, affected the religious adherence of the Jewish girls.

Christian festivals and preparations for them were especially important in convent life. In anticipation, the pupils polished and decorated the chapel, the nuns prepared better food, and for the festival mass and feast the children were dressed in holiday attire that spent most of the year hanging in the closet unused, reserved for these occasions. The resplendent and exacting ritual that accompanied the Christian liturgy lent color to the dullness of daily life in the convent.³⁵

Whereas most Christian children in convents came from poor socioeconomic strata, including foundlings and children born out of wedlock whose parents had abandoned them, all children in the convent were equal, irrespective of origin and social class; their parents' misdeeds were not held against them. Therefore, it was not the custom to probe into the children's past. This attitude somewhat eased the plight of Jewish children, who were enjoined not to describe their former lives and families. Irit (Irena) Kuper relates that some girls in her convent in Ignaców spoke regularly about their families and places of birth, whereas others could not describe their origin because they knew nothing about it. Kuper found this a convenient state of affairs. When she reached the convent, no one asked her about her place of

³⁵ Janina David, *A Touch of Earth* (New York: Orion Press, 1969), pp. 104-106; see also Shlomo Breznitz, *Memory Fields* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1993), pp. 70-77.

birth, her parents' names, or even the name of her relatives. They accepted her as an illegitimate child—a situation that did not trouble her at all.³⁶

A Jewish child from a bourgeois home who was taken in by a convent found himself clueless and unprepared for the new reality. In most cases, the convent was not his first stop; he had already undergone harsh experiences—mortal peril, loss of parents and siblings, and parting from those near and dear to him. When left to his own devices and taken to the convent, he retained little of his self-confidence, the rest having been undermined in a world that had collapsed around him.

Janina David, the daughter of affluent bourgeois parents, was thirteen years old—a relatively advanced age—when brought to the convent. Her custodian had prepared her for the change and had sought and found her a convent that was considered prestigious. Even so, she had no idea what convent life was like until she experienced it.

When told that she would have to move to a convent, Janina was gripped with fear. She knew she would have to conceal her Jewish identity and assumed this would make it hard for her to form friendships. Afraid of the unknown, she attempted to imagine an optimistic picture of social life in a residence such as those in England or Russia, of which she had read. However, the Christian domestic who served loyally in her parents' home destroyed this imaginary world in one stroke.

“It is an orphanage you are going into,” she wailed, wiping her eyes. “They will thrash you and punish you and keep you on your knees for hours. And you will go barefoot in winter and live on cabbage and potatoes. Oh, my poor child, who would have thought that it would come to that, you going into one of them places! . . . You’ll meet there orphans and foundlings of unknown parents.”³⁷

Most children who were admitted to convents in an orderly, formal way arrived with forged Christian birth certificates attesting that they had been duly baptized and were “kosher Christians.” A few had been coached before the transition; they had memorized a cover story, knew what to reveal and what to conceal, and had learned to cross themselves, recite the prayers, and behave

³⁶ Kuper, *At the Edge of the Forest*, p. 119.
³⁷ David, *A Touch of Earth*, p. 24.

correctly in church. Those whose Christian nannies had taken them to church were familiar with basic Christian concepts. Nevertheless, most of them, however assimilated, found convent life an utter novelty.

Janina, raised in a somewhat assimilated home, had been captivated by the charm of the Christian faith since her childhood. Even in the ghetto she yearned to be a Christian, and, when taken to the “Aryan” side, she resolved to convert. However, this did not help her. Her pronounced Semitic facial features, swarthy skin, and black curly hair testified to her Jewishness like a hundred witnesses, and no certificate of baptism could blur it. All she knew when taken to the convent were a few prayers. At morning mass she imitated the other girls’ movements and lagged behind them. Eventually she had to confess to the stunned nun in charge that, although thirteen years old, she had yet to take her first communion.³⁸

Miriam Klein was ten years old when, clutching a forged birth certificate in the name of an orphaned Polish girl, she was taken to the Sercanki convent in Przemyśl through the mediation of the RGO. At that time her parents were hiding with a country peasant and paid for her upkeep. Among the sixty children who were schooled in this convent, thirteen were Jewish fugitives. Miriam looked Jewish, and the nuns took special care of her to keep her from standing out. The other Jewish girls were unversed in the nuances of the Catholic liturgy. To keep their mistakes from being noticed at mass, the nuns placed them in the last row, where they genuflected and imitated their Catholic classmates who stood in front.³⁹

Some children, especially those who had previously lived with Christian families, totally lost their bearings when they entered the convent and encountered black-robed nuns and submissive youngsters. After having bonded with their Christian caregivers and believing that they had reached safety, they were abruptly torn from the homes to which they had become accustomed, with no explanation whatsoever, and were again passed among strangers. Once they recovered from their initial shock, however, they began to feel that the convent was not so bad and, perhaps, even safer than their previous hideouts.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 15, 16.
³⁹ *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, p. 188-190; see also testimony of Miriam Klein, YVA, 03/4071.

Fredzia Student, rescued at the Turkowice convent, was approximately eight years old when the Germans captured her and her mother near the town of Hrubieszów. By then, she had lost everyone but her mother; her father and grandparents were gone. The two survivors roamed in fields and villages and endured the villagers' abuse until the Germans caught them and took them to detention in Hrubieszów. As they were being led away, Fredzia's mother ordered her to pretend not to know her and to deny being Jewish. Fredzia complied. The mother and daughter were incarcerated separately, and young Fredzia, interrogated about her mother, insisted stubbornly that she was a Polish girl and did not know "that woman." After watching her mother being murdered, she was turned over to a Polish woman who cared for her rather effectively. However, for reasons she did not fully understand, she did not stay there for long and was handed over to the Turkowice convent. Subsequently, she described how she made her way there:

"One day, a man appeared and told me he had come to take me to a convent. The Polish woman did not want to turn me over, and I did not want to leave her. I was very afraid of the convent. But the man ignored this and told the Polish woman to pack my belongings. . . .

I parted with her and traveled with the man to the convent. When I got off the train, I was approached by a group of children and a nun. Several of them took my bundles from me and they all walked together with us to the convent. The children looked very serious and quite sad. I was afraid to go to the convent, and I began to cry.

The nun calmed me and said that all the children here have a good life when they are good Christians and pray lots. That made me even more afraid, because I did not know how to pray. They led me into a large hall, where lots of pictures of saints were hanging. The hall was very gloomy and the children were so quiet and educated. . . . I did not want to stay in this place and I gave thought to how to escape. But I did not escape because . . . I remembered that I'd have to hide in the forest all the time so they would not catch me, and I was even more afraid of that."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ephraim Dekel, *Survivors of the Sword* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1963), pp. 151-156.

The story of how Fredzia reached the convent and her revulsion concerning her new home is not extraordinary. Almost all the Jewish children felt this way, but they also believed they had reached safety. In testimonies that attempt to reconstruct the experience of the first encounter with the convent, sentences such as the following recur: “When I reached the convent . . . after the nightmares I had endured, I felt a sense of relief. I felt as if I were in Paradise. The prayers and the climate spoke to me”; “I was enamored with the quiet in the church. I was enveloped in spiritual serenity.”⁴¹

The quiet surroundings, the monotonous work, the sounding of bells at regular intervals, the prayers, and the nuns’ singing combined to project an atmosphere of tranquillity and calm even among those who had fled to convents from the commotion of the street in ordinary times; this was all the more the case among the anxiety-ridden children who had been tossed from place to place without knowing why this was happening and what would become of them. Now, as if hurled from a turbulent sea onto a placid island, they abruptly found themselves in a realm of quiet and seclusion. Outside death lurked at every step; inside, behind the convent walls, life went on as in normal times, as if there were no world war. Aliza Penski describes her first day in the convent:

“I was placed with a group of children who were playing in a circle. Quickly I became re-accustomed to playing children’s games. I was like a regular resident there. In the evening, after vespers, we went to bed. The room was very large and had rows of little white beds. I was given a bed near a little blonde girl who became my best friend. . . . The supervisor of the room was a young, pretty nun named Barbara, whose bed was behind a curtain in the corner. Before I went to sleep, I was told that we all had to sleep on our backs, our arms folded over our hearts. . . . That’s how I fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up before all the children. I looked around . . . and saw that everyone was sleeping quietly and calmly, meaning there was no longer anything to fear. Very slowly many heads began to rise. . . . Sister Barbara stepped out from behind the curtain, fully dressed, and with a cheerful “Good morning” ordered us all to get up and wash up. I took my place

⁴¹ Kurek-Lesik Collection, *Testimony of Nina E.*, p. 60, and of Lova L., p. 194.

in the long line to wash my face and teeth. We got dressed and went to a small chapel on the top floor, where I prayed fervently to Him Who sits on high, asking Him quickly to take me back to my parents and my home.”⁴²

Aliza’s idyllic account of her first day in the convent is unquestionably an accurate depiction of the sudden serenity that enveloped her in her new home, after her previous anxieties. However, she and others in similar straits were still far from safety. More than similar institutions in occupied France or Belgium, convents in Poland were exposed to surprise and brutal visits whenever Gestapo agents or German police suspected that they were concealing Jews. Indeed, denunciations in convents were known to occur, although the informers were convent employees or outsiders, not nuns. Janeczka Karpel, a young Jewish girl who behaved like a Christian, was taken to the Nazarene convent in Olsztyń, near Częstochowa. A sad girl, she hardly spoke with other children, and even the nuns who cared for her knew nothing about her origin. Some time later, the Germans arrested her parents, traced her to the convent, removed her, and murdered her.⁴³

One night, a car full of Gestapo men pulled up at the gate of the Ursuline convent in Siercz. They raided the dormitory, pointed flashlights at the faces of the sleeping girls, and abducted two Jewish girls who had been hiding there. The girls never returned.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the cloistered convents, separated from the surrounding population, provided relatively secure shelter for Jewish children who managed to reach them. After they made their adjustment to their new milieu, the youngsters felt safer and less anxious. Under the circumstances, their subjective response should not be disparaged. The convent gave these miserable souls a roof, enough food to fend off starvation, and a bed—no trifling advantages. However, it did not solve the problem of their Jewish identity.

Although most Jewish children reached convents under an assumed Christian identity or a vague identity, their Jewishness eventually surfaced in

⁴² Testimony of Aliza Penski, YVA, 03/3410.

⁴³ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Sister Rosemary Werwinska, pp. 122-123.

⁴⁴ Wladyslaw Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewin, eds., *Righteous Among the Nations; How Poles Helped the Jews 1939-1945* (London: Earls Court, 1969), p. 355.

full fury, and they never managed to rid themselves of it in order to attain safety once and for all. The testimonies of the nuns who cared for Jewish children show that, apart from infants and toddlers, who were not yet aware of themselves and the surrounding events, all the children who reached the convents were aware of their true identity and understood its grave personal existential significance. Even the youngest of them, only vaguely aware of the secret of who they were, made a supreme effort to keep it from emerging.

The mother superior of the Franciscan Sisters' convent in Łomno, Tekla Budnowska, admitted several Jewish children who had been brought to her from Warsaw. They came with forged birth certificates, and she was told that they had been baptized. She knew they were Jewish and asked them to reveal their real names, which she intended to memorize for use when they were sought after the war. All her inquiries were in vain; stubbornly, the youngsters adhered to the assumed names that appeared on their forged birth certificates. Their mothers, Sister Budnowska explained, had taught them not to divulge their real names under any circumstances. In her estimation, the children were three or four years old.⁴⁵

A girl of kindergarten age named Maryla was enrolled in Irit Kuper's convent. With blue eyes and blonde hair, she hardly looked Jewish, but her behavior at play aroused Irit's suspicions, and she took her under her wing. One day as the girls were waking up, Irit decided to interrogate Maryla and asked her where she had lived and whether she remembered her parents and her home. Maryla leveled her blue eyes at Irit and answered, "My mother told me not to say anything." Irit hugged her and said, "That's right, Maryla. Never tell anyone."⁴⁶

Children who lived under borrowed identities in convents could not withstand the psychological burden, at least not for long. Naturally, they sought out a kindred spirit to share their secret and shatter the unbending barrier of isolation in which they lived. The Jewish girls in the Grey Ursuline convent in Milanówek learned to trust the mother superior, Andrzejka Górka, and poured out their hearts to her and revealed their Jewishness. She was profoundly moved by these children's self-restraint and ability to keep their

⁴⁵ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Sister Tekla Budnowska, pp. 164-165.

⁴⁶ Kuper, *At the Edge of the Forest*, pp. 125-126.

secret. To substantiate the matter, she explained after the war that she had been informed of two sisters who were living in the convent under different last names. When their grandmother came to visit them, she described one as her granddaughter and the other as “just an acquaintance.” Had they not revealed the truth to her, she would never have discovered it.⁴⁷

Keeping the secret did not always help. In the crowded intimacy of convent life, one could hardly conceal one’s Jewish identity for very long. There was no masking the Jewish appearance of a few of the children, and some youngsters, as noted, were unfamiliar with Christian customs or, for lack of confidence, overdid it and called attention to themselves. For example, the nuns of the Servants of Jesus (Sługi Jesusa) convent in Tarnów correctly singled out one of the girls as Jewish because she prayed too loudly and crossed herself too fervently.⁴⁸ The Jewish girls’ good manners, acquired at home, and their rich vocabulary also threatened to bring them under suspicion, because these traits set them apart from the majority of convent children, who came from the fringes of Christian society. Sometimes, too, children revealed their secret in their sleep or while suffering from a fever.⁴⁹

When children were admitted to convents, they began to fit into the society they encountered and to feel that the mortal danger had passed. However, a new feeling quickly ensued: a sense of alienation and inferiority because of their Jewishness, with all the pejoratives that the Christian antisemitic tradition attached to this status. After all, the convent education was based on traditional Christian mythology, which swathes the Jews in negative imagery: the Jews are Satan, Jews collectively committed deicide and subjected God to torture. As such, they are the very embodiment of evil and treachery and deserve punishment, including banishment from the Christian community.

The day-to-day contrast between the devoted care given them by the good nuns in the convent and their remarks about the Jews, to whom they ascribed every sort of horrendous sin, further exacerbated the guilt feelings of the Jewish children on account of their “sin.”

⁴⁷ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, testimony of Sister Andrzejka Górska, pp. 300-301.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, testimony of Sister Jozefa Kolkowska, pp. 202-203.

⁴⁹ Testimony of Magdalena Orner, YVA, 03/6745, pp. 14-15.

Tamar Lubliner was approximately eight years old when she reached the Zagórze convent. She has nothing but effusive praise for the nuns who cared for her but remembers that the same nuns, in their religion lessons in the convent, spoke ceaselessly about the Jews' evil and contemptible nature—even though they never attacked her personally for being Jewish.⁵⁰

Obviously, in such an atmosphere, the children attempted to keep their Jewish identity secret—not only to prevent denunciation to the Germans but also for the very shame of belonging to so contemptible a people. Relentless talk about the Jews' reprehensible traits—including derisive imitation of their behavior and manner of speech—combined with the incriminating whispers to make the lives of some of the convent children unbearable. Janina David, plainly the best-mannered and most intelligent girl in her convent, helped tutor one of the convent's external pupils. This girl, younger than Janina, followed her closely. One day she approached Janina, stared straight at her, and said, "They say you are Jewish! But it isn't true! Is it?" Janina was frightened, took a deep breath, and, at the girl's request, swore that she was not Jewish. "Mother will be glad when I tell her," the girl said. Janina asked her, "And if I were Jewish, would it make any difference?" The girl's eyes welled with tears, and she replied, "Danka, how can you say such a thing! You know I couldn't."⁵¹

Children like Janina, already old enough to understand the kind of world in which they were living, sought ways to escape the thicket. When they failed, they became frustrated, depressed, and lonely. Janina, for example, tried to stand out positively and make herself useful in the convent—notwithstanding the "golden rule" in institutions of this kind, never to volunteer for anything—lest she be accused of being not only a Jew but also a lazy Jew. Thus, she offered to help at any chore—peeling potatoes, carrying pails of water, or polishing the floors—to blur the stain of her Jewishness.⁵²

In such cases, the simplest way to overcome the mental hardship was to confess to a kindred soul who could listen, understand, and even help. A combination of innocence and a wish to treat their benefactors sincerely eventually prompted some of the girls to confess their identity to nuns who

⁵⁰ Testimony of Tamar Lubliner, YVA, 03/1397.

⁵¹ David, *A Touch of Earth*, p. 60.

⁵² Ibid.

had earned their trust. Janina's confessor was Sister Zofia, a classic nun figure who readied her for her first communion and escorted her to baptism. One evening, Janina suddenly began to converse with Sister Zofia about her father's home, after having discussed her parents with no one. Very slowly, she began to tell her story and pour out her heart to the nun. When her account reached the phase of ghetto life, her voice broke. Her memoirs retell the occasion vividly:

Sister Zofia turned off all the lights . . . and opened the window. . . . "Tell me about the ghetto," she said, leaning her head on the window frame. I scrutinized her face anxiously. . . . But there was no visible change of expression. I talked about our wanderings . . . of Father's illness . . . of our hunger and the rows of beggars dying each day on the streets. Of Mother's miscarriage . . . and of the last terrible days in the cellar. And of my escape from the ghetto . . . and of Father's letters which stopped so mysteriously last autumn. The words poured out like blood, in an uneven flow, hot and confused. My back was covered with sweat and my hands cold and clammy, but my head was burning. When I stopped, feeling dizzy with fatigue, I was conscious only of an immense relief. The abscess had burst, the enormous burden of lies and fears which I had been carrying with me all this time was washed away. I leaned back against the wall, eyes closed. . . . Sister Zofia stood motionless . . . staring into the snowy night. . . . "Your father . . . must be a wonderful man. I hope I shall meet him and your mother too, soon." "You will," I promised. "I'll bring them both to meet you, if they don't come here to look for me." . . . She smiled and, in a sudden awkward movement, patted my hair. Then, embarrassed by such uncharacteristic tenderness, she looked at her watch and exclaimed in horror, "It's past midnight! Heavens! Off to bed with you, quick!" I laughed and ran upstairs, feeling as light as a feather.⁵³

The children's Jewish identity troubled them relentlessly, and their clandestine lives prompted them to look for those in their immediate vicinity who shared their fate. If there were several Jewish children in the convent, their finely tuned senses usually brought them together. The nuns could not

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 94-95.

always tell Jews and non-Jews apart, but the Jewish children themselves knew. Among approximately 115 orphans in the Franciscan Sisters’ convent in Lomno, twenty-two girls and one boy—according to the mother superior, Tekla Budnowska—were Jewish. Some were identifiable as such; others were not. All the girls had come with forged Christian birth certificates. Sister Tekla did not always know who was Jewish and who was not, but the girls knew. One day, one of the older Jewish girls reported that eleven-year-old Teresa, who behaved like a Christian in every respect, was Jewish. “She doesn’t look like a Jew at all,” the mother superior replied. But the girl insisted, and her judgment was correct. “We smell each other,” she explained. Indeed, the Jewish girls felt close to each other; the younger ones would trail the older ones and help them when their turn for chores came up.⁵⁴

The Jewish girls identified each other on the basis of exceptional behavior—overt anxiety whenever Jews were discussed, especially when they were maligned; exaggerated manners; or use of phrases that were common in Jewish homes. As clean underwear was being handed out in the Felician convent in Kraków, a girl named Kryisia—a markedly Christian name—received a torn undershirt and inadvertently expressed her resentment to her friend Nina, who stood nearby: “Look at this torn *Leibik*” (Yiddish for undershirt). When the nun moved away, Nina went over to her and asked her directly, “You’re Jewish, aren’t you?” Kryisia, embarrassed, at first tried to deny it and swore that it was not true. However, Nina extracted the confession after applying pressure and disclosing that she, too, was Jewish. Their relationship gathered strength from that moment on. Kryisia then brought a third girl, her cousin, into their secret conspiracy. Afterward, the three of them went to the chapel to be together and tell stories about each other. Three other girls in this convent were suspected of being Jewish; Nina’s Jewish threesome tried to defend them against harassment from Christian girls.⁵⁵

Janina David’s testimony provides another example of rapprochement and shared responsibility among Jewish children who had met each other at random in the convent. A new girl, approximately five years old, was brought to the convent one day, and her brown hair and almond-shaped eyes made

⁵⁴ *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, testimony of Sister Tekla Budnowska, p. 162.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, testimony of Nina E., pp. 57-58.

her a suspect. The younger children surrounded her at once and began to interrogate her about her name. “Is it Rivka? Sarah?” they shouted. Janina interrupted, pulled the girl toward her, and told the younger children, “Her name is Franka.” From then on, she protected “Franka” and treated her like a little sister. She attempted to elicit details about her past and her parents, but “Franka” glared at her and held her silence. One night, when the girl came down with a high fever, Janina sat at her bedside and watched over her. Suddenly she rose, looked straight at Janina, and told her clearly, “My name is Sarah.” Janina, stunned, looked around to make sure no one had overheard her. Then she said, “You are Franka, my little girl. Don’t forget it.” Afterward, she tucked Franka in and caressed her.⁵⁶

Conversion of Jewish “Convent Children”

One way to rid oneself of the burden of Jewish identity in the convent was to exchange it for a Christian identity by means of baptism. Some children chose this path on their own, with the encouragement and assistance of the nuns. However, many other children, especially younger ones, were baptized and converted without being asked and without understanding the significance of the act and its effect on their future. In order to fathom the Jewish children’s experiences on their way to Christianity, one must know the circumstances under which the matter took place.

A convent is, above all, a missionary institution, where those who take the monastic vows should serve as exemplars of Christian life and attract as many people as possible to the true faith of Jesus. In Poland, the Franciscan Sisters’, who dealt in education and the care of needy children, were especially noted for their missionary work. They also rescued many Jewish children. The regulations of the Franciscan missionary community of the Sisters of Mary state that, “those who care for unfortunate and abandoned children must bear in mind that Jesus loved such children more than anyone on earth.”⁵⁷ Therefore, it was only natural for nuns who cared for Jewish children in convents to strive to remake them as Christians. The testimonies of such nuns abound with expressions of satisfaction and pride in regard to

⁵⁶ David, *A Touch of Earth*, pp. 87, 96.
⁵⁷ *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, p. 62.

prized wards who embraced Christianity and refused to return to Judaism. For example, two nuns from Lublin described a Jewish girl who, after the war, vehemently refused to leave her convent over the entreaties of the Jewish committee. “They offered her mountains of gold, but Stasia defended herself courageously and insisted that she was a Christian and was resolved to remain in Poland.”⁵⁸ Sister Andrzejka Górska of the Grey Ursulines testified with undisguised pride that several nuns in her order in Poland were of Jewish origin and had been introduced to the order during the war as refugees in its convents.⁵⁹ However, it would be erroneous to trace the rescue actions of all nuns to missionary motives alone. Furthermore, the facts show that not all children who experienced the convents were baptized into the church. The reality was immeasurably more complex.

Children who reached the convent with certificates of baptism—genuine or fake—were seldom examined and were recorded as Christians. If they lacked a certificate of baptism, either as foundlings or as of uncertain origin, they were baptized, given Christian names, and registered as Christians. This procedure was followed both for children of Christian origin and for Jewish children who arrived without certificates of baptism. If for any reason the children were not baptized immediately upon admission, the action was taken when they fell ill and the nuns were concerned for their lives. The testimonies of many nuns who cared for Jewish children in convents describe this procedure as a routine measure to which thought was not given; from the nuns’ standpoint, it was inconceivable for a child who lived in a convent—or was about to die there—to be denied the Christian kindness of baptism. However, those baptized under these circumstances included not only children who lacked certificates of baptism; in most cases, youngsters who reached the convent with forged baptism certificates also underwent the procedure.

The issue of baptizing Jewish children surfaced in full fury as they approached their first communion, when a child joins the Christian community and receives the Holy Eucharist sacrament of the first communion, the most important action in the life of any believing Christian, is usually taken by

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, testimony of Sister Andrzejka Górska, pp. 301-302.

children aged seven to twelve—a range that fit most of the Jewish “convent children.” Only Christians may take the communion, and persons of dubious Christian status must be baptized beforehand.

The communion ceremony is preceded by lengthy preparation—study of the catechism (the Christian Scriptures and the tenets of the Christian faith) and the first confession. All school-age children are readied for communion, and as they prepare their priests and nuns train them in the deportment of devout Christians—with emphasis on the importance of telling only the truth in confession.

The ceremony itself, replete with pomp and circumstance, takes place in the church with the assemblage looking on. The excited children, dressed in white, line up in rows, clutching lit candles, heads bedecked in floral wreathes. They approach the priest to receive from him, for the first time, the Holy Eucharist. One cannot imagine a Jewish child in a convent refusing to participate in such a ritual.

Children of this age are naturally predisposed to conform and to identify with their educators, *a fortiori* Jewish “convent children” in view of their situation. The nuns not only served them as emblems and examples of pure, faultless Christian life but were also the people closest to them. Thus, the children spared no effort to satisfy them and meet their expectations. Moreover, any attempt to evade the communion might immediately reveal them for what they were, with all the implications this would have for their already complicated social status in the convent. Such behavior would expose them to more than denunciation to the Germans or banishment from the convent; it would also affect their very ability to continue living as alleged anti-Christ ingrates in an institution and a society that had endangered themselves for them, gathered them in, and shared their kindness.

Therefore, it is no wonder that the Jewish children yearned to take the first communion and participated in its preparations with commitment and fervor. The documentary literature on the “convent children” abounds with accounts of the excitement they experienced at the ceremony; some of the children even aspired to win the title of outstanding student in the preparations.

At Aliza Penski's convent in Brwinów, the custom was to allow the outstanding performer in her Christian studies to wear a long white dress to the first communion; the other girls wore short dresses. Aliza decided to compete for the long dress and labored over her catechism. On the appointed day, she reported to the priest with her classmates to be tested, answered all the questions without hesitation, and recited all the prayers as the amazed nuns looked on. At the end of the tests, she was indeed chosen to wear the prized dress. "It had been a long time since I had been so happy. I ran straight to the chapel and thanked God for His kindness," she wrote in her testimony.⁶⁰

The fact that many of the Jewish children were not baptized, having been delivered to convents on the basis of forged birth certificates, presented the nuns with a complicated religious dilemma. From the standpoint of their faith, a non-baptized Jewish child could not be taken to the communion because this was a sacrilege; and they did not always know if a child with an assumed identity had been baptized. Many Jewish children revealed their identity and asked to be converted as they prepared for the communion before the first confession. Some were prompted to do this out of childhood innocence and innate honesty; they did not wish to cause their benefactors to sin. Others, especially older ones who were aware of their condition as Jews, considered this a good opportunity to rid themselves, once and for all, of the burden of their Jewishness and the suffering it caused them; after all, they were being punished and humiliated for more than their role in the collective sin of having crucified Jesus. Jewish children who wished to embrace Christianity were almost always baptized surreptitiously, both for their own safety—because the Germans forbade the baptism of Jews and someone might denounce them—and to avoid embarrassing them before their friends. Notably, however, within this atmosphere of extreme pressure, there were also tragic instances of Jewish children who vehemently refused to accept Christianity and were forcibly baptized.

Nina E. reached the Felician convent in Kraków with a totally convincing Christian birth certificate. Her custodian, a devout Catholic woman, had personally given her an emergency baptism—one using holy water only, as

⁶⁰ Testimony of Aliza Penski, pp. 16-17, YVA, 03/3410.

opposed to the volitional conversion ceremony that requires anointment by a priest. When the custodian placed Nina in the convent, she did not divulge this to the mother superior. Her appearance and behavior allayed any suspicions of Nina's Jewishness. Before she took the first communion, fearing the sacrilege she might commit, she disclosed her Jewish identity to the mother superior and asked to be baptized in full compliance with the rules. The nun, stunned, contemplated her, and said, "My good girl, daughter of the Chosen People, let us set this aside for now." The next day, the mother superior visited Nina's custodian and reprimanded her angrily for having given her a Jewish girl without apprising her of this. After all, she already had five Jews among the eighteen girls in the convent, not including Nina. Eventually, to be on the safe side, she baptized Nina and the other Jewish girls festively but surreptitiously. After the war, Nina reconstructed her experience at the ceremony: "When we were baptized, we were all happy. If something happened to us, we would go to Heaven."⁶¹

Although only fourteen years old, Janina David went to her baptism with every intention of exorcising forever the Jewish identity for which she had suffered so grievously. Before she was placed in the convent, Janina had asked her custodian to have her baptized so she would be no different from her friends. Although her father, willing to do anything to save her, had agreed to this, the custodian refused. She tried to dissuade her, explaining that baptism would not help her because she had not been born a Christian, the procedure was irrevocable, and she was still too young to make such a decision. Janina resolved to embrace Christianity anyway, and when she entered the convent and began to study the principles of the faith, her wish to become a Christian became even more intense. From the very first, she was enchanted by the Christian faith and ritual. She loved to participate in the chapel choir and woke up before the nuns to sing them the early mass. Janina pronounced the Latin words of the liturgy, which she did not understand, with almost a sensual pleasure: "I did not feel that way about the language of the Bible, which I also did not understand, which cost me so many tears in school." Her Jewish identity had caused her nothing but suffering—both

⁶¹ *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, testimony of Nina E., pp. 54-61.

before and after she reached the convent. Still, her appearance made her suspect as a Jew from her first day in the convent, and all her efforts to be a good and devoted pupil were to no avail. From the standpoint of her classmates and the nuns, she was Jewish. Now, a week before Easter, the awaited day came. Before she stood up to receive the communion, Sister Zofia, the godmother and her closest confidante in the convent, led her to the edge of town, where an elderly priest secretly baptized her. After the ceremony, Sister Zofia placed a silver medallion around her neck and suddenly hugged her. In her memoirs, Janina described her feelings after this occasion:

“While she stood in the corridor I went down on my knees and confessed to all the sins my baptism had just washed away. . . . Holding Sister Zofia’s hand I marched through the crowded Warsaw streets breathing in the sharp spring air. . . . I held my head high and chattered non-stop. Now, nobody could hurt me. I had been baptized and given absolution. My soul was spotlessly white. . . . After all, I was exceptionally lucky. Most people were baptized long before they understood what it means, while I was in a position fully to appreciate the sacrament and try to live up to its demands. My head swam. I felt drunk with the spring air, with the sudden freedom of movement, freedom from fear and overwhelming joy of belonging, at last, to the Christian Church.”⁶²

Not everyone experienced this spiritual uplifting when baptized. In the convent of the Immaculate Sisters in Szymanów, a group of children stepped forward for their first confession before the communion, and one of the little girls burst into tears in front of the confessional. The priest did not understand the meaning of her weeping and tried at first to calm her. Then she told him that when her father had moved her and her younger brother to the “Aryan” side of the city to save them, he had sworn them not to accept Christianity under any circumstances. In her isolation, this nine-year-old girl could not cope with the conflict between loyalty to her father and awareness that she was about to commit sacrilege by receiving the communion without being

⁶² David, *A Touch of Earth*, pp. 22, 39-40, 99-101.

baptized. The nuns who were apprised of the secret baptized her secretly, and the other children knew nothing about it.⁶³

Several Jewish girls who found shelter in the Albertine convent in Kraków took pains to participate in worship with everyone else in the convent chapel, aroused no suspicions, and survived. However, one of them, the daughter of a Jewish physician from Kraków, refused to go to church and stated frankly that she was Jewish and absolved from Christian prayers. According to the testimony of the mother superior, Polish women in the convent shelter turned her over to the Germans, who almost certainly murdered her.⁶⁴

The baptism of Jewish children during their stay in the convent is a tragic issue fraught with both religious and moral complications. From the nuns' standpoint, it was done for the children's own good and, in many cases, with their full consent. Nevertheless, it evokes a piercing moral question that cannot always be reconciled with Catholic ethics and praxis. According to Catholic canon law, children are baptized only with the consent of both or, at the very least, one of their parents, and only if there is a reasonable likelihood of giving them a Christian education.⁶⁵ In the convents, most Jewish children were baptized without any consultation with their parents.

Kurek-Lesik, who studied the rescue of Jewish children in convents in Poland, attempts to understand why the nuns decided to baptize the Jewish children in their care. As she explains it, the nuns took a maternal approach to these children and baptized them because Christian mothers would take this action for their own children at a time of danger. She does not dismiss the nuns' underlying missionary motive but, to vindicate them, argues that they endangered themselves for these children, were willing to forfeit their lives for them, and acted on behalf of their ideal, the very essence of their lives—*imitatio Dei*.⁶⁶

However, Kurek-Lesik also provides examples of convents in which children were not forcibly converted. Notably, too, several nuns opposed in

⁶³ Bartoszewski and Lewin, eds., *Righteous among the Nations*, p. 362.

⁶⁴ Kaczmaszyk, *Pomoc udzielana Żydom*, pp. 1-2, YVA, JM 3636

⁶⁵ *Kurek-Lesik* Collection. The principled attitude of the mother superior of the Elizabethan convent, Ludwika Małkiewicz, is described on p. 43. Concerning Catholic practice in the matter of baptizing non-Catholic children, see Dequeker, "Baptism and Conversion of Jews in Belgium, 1939-1945," in Michman, ed., *Belgium and the Holocaust*, pp. 263-264.

⁶⁶ *Kurek-Lesik*, *Gdy Klasztor znaczył życie*, pp. 110-117.

principle the baptism of their Jewish wards, even when the children requested this.

Although the Sacred Heart convent in Przemyśl was very poor, its devoted nuns enveloped the concealed Jewish children in tranquility and security. In response to this excellent treatment, the youngsters identified with the nuns, and quite a few of them asked explicitly to be converted. The nuns discouraged them. Sister Liguria taught them to recite Catholic prayers and cross themselves, explaining that they must do this so as not to stand out from the other children but still must live within their own faith. The nun told Miriam Klein, who ardently wished to convert, that faith is not a see-saw and cannot be replaced. When you reach adulthood at the age of twenty, she continued, you may convert if you still wish to do so. When by chance a Jewish prayer-book had found its way to the convent, Sister Bernarda asked Miriam what it was. When Miriam told her that it was a Jewish prayer-book, the nun took it and occasionally closed Miriam in her room so she could read from it. She explained, “You’ll pray to the God of the Jews and we’ll pray to Jesus. When we’ll pray together, perhaps we’ll also survive the war.”⁶⁷

The addiction of the Jewish children—especially the girls—to the Catholic rite is a well-known phenomenon in research on the “convent children.” Perusal of their testimonies shows that, in their psychological and physical situation and the depressing gloominess of the convent milieu, they found consolation in the Catholic religion and ritual. The nuns’ messages to the Jews stressed that Jesus and Mary, Mother of God, were especially predisposed to kindness and mercy toward the weak and the oppressed. If we pause to consider the special plight of Jewish children in the convents, we should find it no wonder that this message spoke to their hearts and the Catholic faith relieved their distress. Thus, Adam Pruszkowski describes his path to Christianity:

“I encountered authentic religious life in Turkowice. It was a world I had not known until then. . . . Here my life changed and I became pious. . . . I loved to spend time in the chapel whenever I could. I went about my religious studies ardently. . . . I had sundry motives in my faith. First of all, religion gave

⁶⁷ *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, testimony of Miriam Klein, pp. 188-191; see also her testimony in YVA, 03/4071.

me some confidence. It gave me camouflage, so to speak, and made me resemble everyone else. . . . [In retrospect] I do not totally rule out the possibility that by embracing the faith I also attempted to obtain kindnesses from the nuns. I had nothing in common with my classmates; they did not like me and I felt very lonely. . . . I placed my trust in God and believed He would not forsake me.”

Adam was very impressed with the religious rite practiced in Turkowice, especially in its aesthetic aspect. The chapel was the only clean, tidy place in the institution, and he loved to listen to the choir as it sang to the accompaniment of the organ. All aspects of the holiday mass made an especially strong impact on him. After liberation, his mother reached him after much hardship and a two-year separation. The nuns gave her a warm welcome, and, after discussing matters with the priest, she agreed to have Adam baptized⁶⁸ as a gesture of gratitude for his rescue.

In other convents, too, older girls felt a need, shortly before or immediately after liberation, of all times, to convert and make a clean break with their Jewish past. In the Grey Ursuline convent in Warsaw, six girls converted at the end of the war and were still living there in 1950.⁶⁹ According to Sister Olga Abramczuk, the Magdalene convent in Lvov rescued nine girls; according to the convent records, four of them converted in August 1944, immediately after liberation.⁷⁰

Insofar as people in the Jewish community had suspected from the outset that the price of saving children in convents would be their conversion, reality showed that they were usually right. There was no need to coerce youngsters to accept Christianity. Their psychological situation and total immersion in the institution’s milieu evidently made this a natural process; they could not behave otherwise.

How the Nuns Treated the Jewish Children

As we have stated, the placid atmosphere in the convent had a soothing effect on the Jewish children, especially at first. However, the unbending regimen, sometimes coupled with stinging insults and corporal punishment,

⁶⁸ *Dzieci Holocaustu Mówią*, pp. 108-109, 118.

⁶⁹ *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, pp. 254-255.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, testimony of Sister Olga Abramczuk, pp. 105-106.

was detrimental to all the children, especially those—like most of the Jewish children—who had grown up in proper bourgeois homes. This was compounded by special hardships: loneliness engendered by having to keep the secret of their identity and past, separation from their families, and ignorance of what their future held in store.

Escape to the embrace of Christianity was only one of several methods invoked by Jewish youngsters to overcome their distress, but it was an effective escape. More than Christian children, who were among their own people and faced mortal peril from no quarter, Jewish children needed a kindred soul to whom they could unload and share their secret and their anguish. Naturally, they sought such souls among the nuns who cared for them.

Most of these nuns were not professional educators who were hired for their pedagogical abilities. Furthermore, their rigid educational system was based on hierarchy and distance between caregiver and care recipient. Researchers lack information on the lives of these nuns, since the very purpose of convent life is to blur the singularity of their personalities and the motives that prompted them to take the vows. The little we know about them is culled from subsequent testimonies of children who reached adulthood. Nevertheless, and although they looked alike and projected uniform loyalty to the faith, they were certainly different from each other, like individuals in any ordinary group of people. Each came from a particular social background; each had her own persona. Some were intelligent women with natural teaching skills; they treated the children devotedly. Others had undisguised maternal feelings that endeared them to the children; these nuns smothered them with affection. Still others were ignorant, prejudiced, and bothersome; they treated the youngsters with condescension.

As for the nuns' special attitude toward the Jewish children, again one must avoid generalizations and discuss only cases in which the nuns knew beyond doubt that a boy or girl in their care was indeed Jewish.

It must be noted that most testimonies of "convent children," written and collected years after the fact, cite the nuns favorably, affectionately, and appreciatively. Expressions such as "They were good to us" or "They loved

me” recur frequently, sometimes with mention by name of nuns with whom the children had formed especially strong bonds. Nina E. described her relations with her care-giving nuns in the following terms: “The three nuns who cared for us were really all right and tried very hard. . . . Sister Marcelina was a special woman. For me she was not only a mother but a friend. She cared for us and pampered us.”⁷¹ Even those who criticize the convents’ educational methods and dwell on the bleakness of convent life, the inflexibility, and even the cruelty that certain nuns applied, sometimes behind a mask of self-declared piety, mention the “good nun” who treated them well. Hannah Shehori, who stayed in the Resurrection convent in Warsaw, criticizes the sisters she encountered for their unbending and austere attitude toward their wards but makes sure to note that “There was only one nun there who liked me very much.”⁷² A. S., rescued at the Magdalene convent in Rabka, censures the nuns for hypocritical conduct but carefully avoids generalization; she describes the mother superior, Teresa Ledochowska, as an “elegant and refined woman” and cites Sister Julia, the convent cook, for having fed her secretly whenever she was hungry.⁷³

However, one cannot disregard the antisemitic manifestations and offensive outbursts that nuns inflicted on Jewish children in certain convents. Magdalena Orner, who stayed in the Felician convent in Przemyśl for many years after the war, after having been sheltered there, relates that even though she was a good and diligent student and had been singled out as a candidate to become a nun, the nuns took a different attitude toward her after she revealed her Jewishness; their antisemitism suddenly emerged. They would sometimes beat her to the point of drawing blood for trivial breaches of discipline, such as being late to a meal; “Szymanska [her Polish family name], don’t forget that you are Żydowka [a Jewess],” they would shout.⁷⁴

When the nuns merely suspected that Janina David had contracted scabies, a contagious skin disease, the nurse who was supposed to treat her shouted: “We do what we can to teach you cleanliness, but what hope have we got against racial characteristics? What has been inbred from one

⁷¹ Ibid., testimony of Nina E., pp. 60-61.

⁷² Testimony of Hannah Shehori (Rosenblatt), YVA, 03/4751.

⁷³ Kurek-Lesik Collection, testimony of A.S., pp. 114-115.

⁷⁴ Testimony of Magdalena Orner, YVA, 03/6745, p. 15.

generation to another. . . . You people were always filthy and you always will be. . . .”⁷⁵ This to a girl who had been accustomed to strict rules of hygiene at home and in an institution that offered only the most rudimentary hygienic conditions—a full bath was a rarity.

In contrast to these antisemitic manifestations, other nuns fathomed the special anguish of their Jewish wards, attempted to protect them and improve their conditions, and treated them with special devotion. Miriam Klein testifies that she felt safe in the convent because she knew the nuns would protect her. Sister Bernarda, her direct caregiver, was aware of her fears and gave her a key to the chapel so she could hide in the altar if the Germans raided the convent in search of Jews.⁷⁶

Mother General Josefa—Helena Witer, who headed the convents of the Uniate Studite order in Eastern Galicia, personally welcomed Jewish children who were referred to her, distributed them among her institutions, and took pains to assure their safety. Although she incurred grave risk, she went about this labor assiduously and described it as her Christian religious duty. The wife of Rabbi David Kahane, also sheltered in a Uniate institution, chanced to visit Mother Josefa’s convent in Lvov and found her in her private bathroom administering to two neglected Jewish girls whom someone had delivered to the convent after they had leaped off a train heading for the Bełżec extermination camp. Mother Josefa bathed them, deloused them, and dealt with one’s bullet wound from a German’s gun. The rabbi’s wife asked to help, but the abbess refused, saying, “I am doing my duty and I am doing it to fulfill a commandment. I want to fulfill this commandment all by myself, without any help.”⁷⁷

Yonah Altshuler was hidden in a convent in Warsaw with another Jewish girl. After the Polish uprising was put down, the convent was dissolved, and the nuns were exiled to Germany for forced labor. The girls’ caregiver, a nun about forty years old, kept them with her and did not abandon them, despite the many hardships of the trek. Once in her place of exile, she continued to care for them as if she were their mother. She took them to the field where

⁷⁵ David, *A Touch of Earth*, p. 139.

⁷⁶ *Kurek-Lesik* Collection, testimony of Miriam Klein, pp. 188-189, and YVA, 03/4071.

⁷⁷ David Kahane, *Lvov Ghetto Diary*, pp. 148-150; quotation, p. 150.

she had to work at grueling labor from sunrise to late evening, and shared the scanty rations given her by her German peasant overseer. After the liberation, they returned with her to Poland, and before she resumed her pre-war life she placed them in a convent in Czestochowa for their safety. It is, therefore, no wonder that Yonah, summarizing her experiences in convent life, said, “I have a sentiment for the Catholic faith and for [the nuns]. I have nothing but good things to say about the nuns.”⁷⁸

When the nuns and the tormented Jewish children formed such relationships, it was very difficult to remove some of the youngsters from convents after the war. Irit Kuper was brought to the convent as a little girl and discharged as a teenager. Throughout her stay, she was aware of her Jewish identity and refused to convert, even though the mother superior pressured her to do so. Even she, however, found it difficult to part from the mother superior and the convent itself. Her memoirs present a passionate account of her experiences after she refused to convert and parted from the mother superior and the convent after the liberation:

“Sister,” I said, “I can’t stay here anymore. I don’t like it here.” She looked at me and smiled. . . . “Maybe I can help you,” she offered. “No, no, thanks for everything.” I woke up early and left. Everyone was sleeping and I said good-bye to no one. . . . I hurried across the convent courtyard. I did not glance at the kitchen, where I had worked from my first day there. Tears welled up in my eyes. Why was I crying? It troubled me to leave this shelter. I loved it. Here I had found refuge from the Germans’ persecutions, from the peasants’ rebukes. Here I had received a bed, a sheet and a blanket, and plenty of food. I loved the holidays, the church choir, and more than that, the nuns and the mother superior. In the morning I would listen to the nuns’ singing, the tender, sad tones emerging from their windows. I imbibed their tender sadness and found in it solace for my agonized soul.”⁷⁹

Indeed, many of the “convent children” retained a warm spot in their hearts for the nuns who had rescued and cared for them, as attested by the many requests Yad Vashem received to recognize them as Righteous Among the Nations. After they reached adulthood, some of the children corresponded

⁷⁸ Testimony of Yonah Altshuler, YVA, 03/5568.

⁷⁹ Irit R. Kuper, *As Everything Passes* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1980), p. 80.

with the nuns for years, sent them food parcels and medicines, and visited them after Poland opened its gates to tourists. A few even brought their rescuers to visit them in Israel.

How Many Children Were Saved in Convents?

The subject of the “convent children” is one of the most sensitive issues in the relationship between the Church and the Jews during and after the Holocaust. It is one that preoccupied much of the Jewish public immediately after the war and for years afterward because not all of these children were returned to the Jewish fold. The convent leaders never disclosed how many children were saved in their institutions, and Jewish institutions had no statistics that could clarify the matter. The issue remains unresolved. Although copious testimonies about children rescued in convents have accumulated over the years, we cannot ascertain their number and doubt that any verifiable figures will ever be forthcoming.

These children reached the convents with assumed Christian identities and were registered as such in the convent records; even if the nuns knew they were Jewish, they took care not to record them as such for security reasons. Therefore, the convent archives cannot yield statistics. Systematic recording of testimonies in this matter did not begin until the early 1970s, more than twenty-five years after the war. By that time, many mothers superior who might have known the numbers had died, and those who remained alive had no records whatsoever.

Since the 1970s, however, comprehensive research in Poland on the activities of the Church and the convents during World War II has been developing.⁸⁰ Several such studies contain partial data on Jewish children rescued in convents. According to figures cited by Teresa Fracek, for example, nuns of the Sisters of Mary Family saved 750 Jews. Among them were 500 children—420 rescued in thirty-five convents and other institutions of the order, and eighty placed with families.⁸¹ According to Magdalena Kaczmarzyk, the Albertine nuns played a similar role in saving Jews: their

⁸⁰ See Kłoczowski, *The Religious Orders*, p. 239.

⁸¹ Teresa Fracek, “Zgromadzenie Sióstr Franciszkanek Rodziny Maryi w latach 1939-1945,” in *Kościół, Katolicki na ziemiach Polski*, vol. 10 (Warsaw: ATK), 1981, p. 200, cited in *Kurek-Lesik Collection*, pp. 158-159.

twenty-nine convents rescued fifty of ninety-five Jews who found shelter there. Kaczmarzyk does not specify how many of them were children.⁸²

Even though the Franciscan-affiliated nuns are known to have been especially active in rescuing Jews, Fracek's figures seem to be overstated. Notably, Kurek-Lesik, who studied the matter and had no interest in belittling the nuns' role in it, also has some misgivings about this figure. She comments that Fracek exaggerated slightly and did not look into the possibility that children who spent time in two convents, for example, were counted twice among those rescued.⁸³ According to Kurek-Lesik, 189 convents took part in rescuing children in Poland within its 1939 frontiers; 173 of them were in the Generalgouvernement, including sixty-four in Warsaw and the vicinity.

In her doctoral dissertation for the Catholic University in Lublin, subsequently published as a book, Kurek-Lesik estimates the number at no fewer than 1,200.⁸⁴ Elsewhere, Jerzy Kłoczowski describes the difficulties that the lack of authentic documents poses for researchers on this subject, but, in his summary, he states that several thousand children and several hundred adults were saved by the religious orders.⁸⁵ According to Kurek-Lesik's reckonings, also based on later testimonies, three-fourths of all convent orphanages and residential institutions took part in rescuing Jewish children.⁸⁶

Were these figures correct, one would have to credit the convents for about one-fourth of the 5,000 Jewish children saved in Poland—an unacceptable figure according both to Jewish sources⁸⁷ and also according to the copious testimonies from the convents that Kurek-Lesik appended to her dissertation. However, several convents deserve special mention for admitting Jewish children and saving many of them, relatively speaking. For example, the aforementioned Turkowice convent saved about thirty children.⁸⁸ Thirteen girls survived in the Sacred Heart convent in Przemyśl.⁸⁹ The Franciscan

⁸² Kaczmarzyk, *Pomoc udzielana Żydom*, p. 1.

⁸³ Kurek-Lesik, *Gdy Klasztor znaczył życie*, p. 163, n. 95.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸⁵ Kłoczowski, "*The Religious Orders and the Jews*," p. 243.

⁸⁶ Kurek-Lesik, *Gdy Klasztor znaczył życie*, p. 127.

⁸⁷ Lucian Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 14-18.

⁸⁸ Testimony of Irena Sendler concerning the Turkowice convent, YVA, M31/4394.

⁸⁹ Testimony of Miriam Klein, *ibid.*, 03/4071; Kurek-Lesik Collection, testimony of Liguria Grenda, pp. 184-186.

Sisters” convent in Łomno rescued more than twenty.⁹⁰ However, most convents are known to have rescued much fewer. Sometimes only one child survived in a given convent, although perusal of the testimonies shows that this was unusual. Also noteworthy were the seven Studite convents of the Uniate Church in Eastern Galicia, where an estimated 150 Jews, many of them children, were saved.⁹¹

Since reliable sources on the number of Jewish children rescued in convents in Poland are unavailable, the matter will probably remain in the realm of conjecture.⁹² To this author, the available sources point to hundreds, not thousands, that were rescued.

Similarly nebulous is the number of “convent children” who did not return to the Jewish fold. As we have stated, some of these children were toddlers or infants who knew nothing about their origin. Since most convents were not geared to admit and care for children so young, they tried to rid themselves of them at the first opportunity and, after baptizing them, placed them with adoptive Christian families. According to data provided by the Franciscan Sisters’, eighty children survived after having been placed with families, but nothing about their fate is known. Several nuns testified that Jewish children had been given over for adoption after lengthy stays in convents.⁹³ One Jewish girl was adopted by the family of a German officer. An anonymous woman placed a smart, cute little Jewish girl named Zosia in the nursery of the Albertine nuns in Tarnów. At first, she visited the toddler and pretended to be her mother, but after a short time she disappeared. A German officer who visited the nursery took a liking to the girl. One day he came there with his wife, and after he convinced the nun in charge to turn her over, they took her back to Germany.⁹⁴

A study of the convent testimonies concerning the adoption procedures shows that not only were the records haphazard and the nuns did not check to

⁹⁰ Kurek-Lesik Collection, testimony of Sister Tekla Budnowska, p. 162.

⁹¹ Levin, *Specje*, pp. 174-175.

⁹² Zygmunt Zielinski, “Activities of Catholic Orders on Behalf of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland,” in Otto Dov Kulka, ed., *Judaism and Christianity under the Impact of National Socialism* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1987), p. 391.

⁹³ Concerning the way the Albertine sisters in Tarnopol placed a Jewish infant with a Christian adoptive family, see Kaczmarzyk, *Pomoc udzielana Żydom*, p. 16; YVA, JM 3636.
⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

see if the children had parents or other relatives, but the children's traces were deliberately blurred when their adoptions were consummated. The nuns kept the names of their adoptive parents secret. After the war, when the children's parents or relatives visited the convents to trace them, the nuns refused to disclose the adoptive parents' identities. On more than one occasion, government agencies and courts had to intervene in order to force nuns and adoptive parents to return children to their families.⁹⁵

The story of the "convent children" who did not return to the Jewish fold is complicated and painful and beyond the purview of this article. Here suffice it to note that the difficulties that attended the matter in Poland were no different from those that surfaced in other European countries. The main difficulty was that the convents were not willing to return children to Jewish institutions that asked for them and refused to recognize them as the youngsters' custodians.

Translated from Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies* Vol. XXVII, Jerusalem 1999 pp. 235-285.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 5-6.