

Abraham Rubin. *Conversion and Catastrophe in German-Jewish Émigré Autobiography*. University of Toronto Press, 2024. 196 pages, USD 29.95, ISBN 978-1-4875-6109-3

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The Christianisation of the Holocaust is one of the salient portrayals brought to the fore by Abraham Rubin's collective biography of four German-Jewish émigrés who converted to Christianity during the years of the Third Reich. It is one result of his interrogating analysis of whether, and to what degree, a 'literary paradigm' of individual Jewish conversion during the years of the Holocaust is 'an appropriate vehicle to articulate what was essentially a collective catastrophe' of the people from whom the converts were distancing (5). It is also a central aspect of his answer to the searching question of whether, and to what degree, the converts were 'aware of the moral compromises and constraints' in their post facto presentation of persecutions as Jews in the Christian 'theological idiom of sin and salvation' (152).

Rubin looks sensitively but critically at the complexities of these questions in the lives of the four Jewish émigré writers who endured persecution, despair, and loss of identity under Nazi rule, and then, in the postwar period, interlaced the stories of their survival with stories of their 'spiritual and confessional transformations' (10). The four men, two of whom left Germany soon after Hitler came to power, emigrated between 1933 and 1935. Karl Jacob Hirsch, a 41-year-old expressionist novelist in Berlin, had enough anti-nationalist acclaim to be placed on the Nazi list of forbidden books. Alfred Döblin, a 55-year-old neurologist practicing in Berlin, was a celebrated novelist and member of the Prussian Academy of Arts. Both men fled with their families shortly before or after their books were burned in the Nazi bonfires of May 1933. The other two left Germany with their families in 1935. Karl Stern was a 27-year-old psychiatrist on a Rockefeller grant at the Research Institute for Psychiatry in Munich when the Nazi reign began, and Heinrich Kronstein was a 36-year-old lawyer with a PhD practicing in Mannheim.

None of the four émigrés converted, however, until 1940 to 1945. Kronstein, who subsequently became a professor of antitrust law and intellectual property at Georgetown University, became Catholic in 1940 in Washington, D.C. Döblin, who continued writing in the hope of reviving his literary career, converted to Catholicism in 1941 in Los Angeles. Stern, the youngest of the four and the only one to settle in Canada, joined the Catholic church in Montreal in 1943 and became a professor of psychiatry. Hirsch, who worked as a journalist until hired by the New York Office of Censorship, converted to Protestantism in 1945. The accounts of their conversions were published

over the next twenty-seven years. Each of the three exiling in the US published his account in the German language after returning to Germany in 1945 for varying periods of time: Hirsch in 1946, Döblin in 1949, Kronstein in 1967. Stern's account, the only one published in English, came out in 1951 and became an international bestseller.

Pressing in on the retrospective nature of the conversion accounts, *Conversion and Catastrophe* is less about the converts' lives and more about the narratives of their lives that were constructed by the émigré authors after their conversions. The four autobiographies, each of which are analysed in separate chapters, are presented as illustration of the ways in which 'individual conscience and belief become entangled with the struggle for political and social self-legitimation' (13). As such Rubin assigns a 'distinctly political significance' to conversion on the grounds that it signifies 'social location and public identity' in relation to both divine providence and a 'national and political community' (13). Second, contrary to belief that 'conversion represents a radical break with one's Jewish past', he argues that the 'political and cultural dilemmas of German-Jewish identity' carried over into the convert accounts (5-6). Third, taking his lead from historian Todd Endelman,<sup>1</sup> he places conversion on the 'far end of a broad spectrum' of assimilatory behaviour, arguing that the émigré converts in this study should be seen as 'occupants', rather than 'outsiders', on a continuum between conversion and other forms of acculturated Jewish identity available to Jews in this period (12-13).

Within this framework Rubin pieces together the contexts, the stories, and the stories within the stories as the émigré authors moved *from* early experiences of learning they were Jewish *to* bearing the stigma of Jewishness and, from there, to the complexities of choosing to change religious identities while coping with the consequences of their choices. The highly readable chapters, pierced through with the heartaches common to the human condition, as well as those that only the historically stigmatized feel, paint a complex picture of trauma and consolation, lost identity and self-reinvention, spiritual searching and faltering faith: a portrait that is skilfully unpacked via the blending of multiple theoretical lenses.

Rubin's main analytical compass, however, is set on the rhetorical means used by the émigré converts to reconcile their Jewish heritage with their conversions while legitimizing their choices to convert. All four authors narrated their turn to Christianity 'in relation to the rise of National Socialism and their experiences of persecution, exile and survival' (9); all struggled to 'discern the providential design behind their personal destiny' (10); and all found justification for their 'pains of displacement, exile and persecution' in the 'deep structures of meaning' underlying their suffering (151).

In raising that underlying meaning to the surface, Rubin uses the neutralising language of 'archetypes', 'typologies' and 'tropes' that are common to literary criticism, but he does not gloss over or neutralise the textual details that function as witness to the well-worn patterns of Christian thought that informed the convert accounts.

Divinely ordained Jewish suffering stood at the crux of the émigré converts' acquired meaning of the deep reality behind the catastrophe visited upon the Jewish people. For

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<sup>1</sup> Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold*, 6-8.

Hirsch, in 1946, 'Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis was a consequence of the crucifixion and the Jews' subsequent refusal to recognize the divinity of Christ' (42). For both Stern and Kronstein, in 1951 and 1967 respectively, the spiritual reality of a 'messianic meaning to the collective suffering of the Jews' led to their 'wholly different attitude towards persecution' (106, 140). The same mystical meaning that became clear for Stern 'under the indescribable dread of persecution' (107), meant for Hirsch that the '*accursed path of the Jew from the cross in Golgotha to the gas chamber in Auschwitz*' would not come to an end by any means other than conversion (42, original italics).

The distribution of guilt and blame in the published accounts is equally striking. For Hirsch, 'the guilt for the Holocaust' lay 'not with the Germans, who were merely minor players in a larger divine drama unfolding since the time of Christ, but with the Jews themselves' (42). Germans, on the other hand, were posited as victims of Nazism by Döblin and Kronstein, while Nazism was held by all to be the result of 'modern Europe's rejection of its religious roots' (85, 127, 141). The ultimate Nazi victims in the schema of attribution were thus posited as Christians and Christianity. Both Kronstein and Stern rendered the Jews as 'vicarious victims of Nazism's true enemy', with Kronstein explaining that 'annihilation of the Jews was only the first phase in the planned extermination of Christianity' (144-5). Such de-victimisation and blaming of Jews appears through the narratives, arguably reaching its apogee in Stern's 1951 equation of Jews and Judaism with Nazism itself (112).

While extended analysis of *from whom* the converts learned these and other 'deep' meanings is beyond the scope of Rubin's study, he recognises that the convert accounts confirm Hannah Arendt's finding in her biography of Jewish convert Rahel Varnhagen, namely, that 'if one accepted Christianity, one had to accept the time's hatred of the Jews right along with it'.<sup>2</sup>

In so doing he advances two general but critical points. Like Todd Endelman, he argues that the study of Jewish conversion illuminates the predominant religio-cultural ideals and socio-political structures of the environments in which Jews converted.<sup>3</sup> Second, by extending Arendt's passage to include that 'both Christianity and anti-Semitism were integrating components of the historical past', making it possible 'to assimilate only by assimilating to anti-Semitism also', he identifies the predominant Christian ideals and structures in question while affirming multi-directional causal linkages between the two (152-53).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, his analytical recognition that the greatest post-Holocaust challenge for the convert authors was rationalizing their conversion choices with 'Christianity's burdensome legacy of antisemitism' (170n15), coupled with careful handling of the traumas associated with those choices, is one of the balancing strengths of Rubin's study. His

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<sup>2</sup> Rubin's reference is to Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 182, a first draft of which was completed in 1933 but not ready for publication until 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt's linking of Christianity and antisemitism in this book appeared in public six years after the first edition of her major work on antisemitism, in which she refuted the idea of 'eternal antisemitism' while acknowledging the historical 'facts' of Christian Jew hatred. See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1-10.

cautiously probing analyses substantiate in a vice versa relation both existing and new research, which in turn advances the broader multidisciplinary discussion on how conversion is to be understood in the context of the Holocaust. More precisely, as one example, when his analysis of convert memoirs between 1946 and 1967 is read with Yaakov Ariel's research on evangelical memoirs of survivor converts in the 1970s,<sup>5</sup> and then studied alongside new research on ecumenical Protestant discourse for Jewish missions as the only solution to the Jewish Problem between 1930 and 1948,<sup>6</sup> a five-decade picture of transnational argumentation on Jewish suffering and conversion fills in, revealing the same pattern of discourse from both conversionist and convert perspectives.

*Conversion and Catastrophe*, whether read in conjunction with related literatures or as a stand-alone book, should shatter any idea that conversion in this period was simply a matter of choosing to move from one religious identity to another. The chapter analyses bring to the fore the manifold complexities of the conversion process in both the lives of the exile converts and the ways in which it was portrayed in the convert autobiographical narratives. Yet while trying to strike a balance between sensitive portrayal and critical analysis of the complexities, the analyses do not shy from the questions of moral agency and historical accountability associated with the published volumes: not those regarding the émigré authors, the supersessionist structure of Christian beliefs informing them, or the post-Holocaust public who read and agreed with their Christianising of the Holocaust. This is a rigorously questioning study which, though limited in scope, makes important multi-aspect contributions to one of the thorniest issues in Holocaust studies.

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Ariel, Yaakov. 'From Faith to Faith: Conversions and De-Conversions during the Holocaust', *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 12 (2013), 37-66.

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<sup>5</sup> Ariel, 'Jewish Suffering and Christian Salvation'. Like Rubin's convert authors, Ariel's study of convert memoirists held that the Holocaust was 'a chapter in the Jewish encounter with Christ' (76) and that Jewish suffering and murder under Nazism 'was a result of not having placed themselves under the wings of Jesus' (69). For his broader discussion on conversion and de-conversion during the Holocaust period, see Ariel, 'From Faith to Faith'.

<sup>6</sup> Sanzenbacher, *Tracking the Jews*. In this archival study of the conversionary discourse of a mandated ecumenical Protestant lobby for world expansion of Jewish missions in the interwar, war, and postwar years, representing 210 Jewish mission agencies in 36 countries by 1932, equations of Nazism with modern Jewry and Judaism were circulating within a few months of Hitler's ascension to power in January 1933. Arguments on the role of Jewish suffering in the conversion process, while foundational, became more deeply theologised in relation to Nazi persecution of Jews after the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, gaining force with the *Anschluss* and continuing into the postwar period. The development of theological arguments that Christianity was, at root, the ultimate victim of Nazism followed a similar path.

Endelman, Todd. *Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Sanzenbacher, Carolyn. *Tracking the Jews: Ecumenical Protestants, Conversion, and the Holocaust*. Manchester University Press, 2024.