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A History of Jewish Mission in Europe until World War I: Some unknown facts and figures. Return to our roots.

Jewish Mission in Europe – when did it start?

We often describe history on the background of our own traditions and context, which means “history of mission” according to the development of organized mission through societies and organizations.

From the very beginning – the day of Pentecost – European Jews were part of the new Jesus movement¹. In Thessalonica as well as Berea we read about a great number of Jews coming to faith in Yeshua, as well as Greek men and women, some of them believing in the God of the Jews.² The Body of Messiah expanded throughout the whole Roman Empire and beyond, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles.

Why do I mention this? Just to make us aware of the fact that the presence of Jewish Believers in Europe represents continuity, not only a phenomenon in certain decades or areas. The Caspari Center project “Jewish Believers in Jesus through history” has so far given us a scholarly documentation of the presence of Jewish Believers in Jesus in the first centuries of the early church, and the variety and plurality of expressing identity and faith:

There was not only an internal pluralism within the two communities of Jews and Christians. There was also, in most places and most of the time, a not inconsiderable segment of the two communities that overlapped. And the pluriformity was not less here. The gentile Judaizers came in different degrees and different forms. The Jewish believers in Jesus did the same. Some of the latter remained within the social borders of Jewish community, and were, as seen be outsiders, just “ordinary” Jews who happened to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Some of them were part of mixed communities – Jewish believers and Gentile believers in Jesus joined together – and were often not well looked upon in the local Jewish community because of their close fellowship with Gentiles.³

This reference to antiquity is mentioned, because I believe it is relevant to later movements of Jewish believers in Jesus. Even if we speak about constant continuity, we also see revivals and numbers of Jews coming to faith in Jesus, especially in greater Jewish communities and shtetles in East Europe during the 19th and 20th century.

Apostates, Hybrids or true Jews?

Dr. Raymond Lillevik presented last autumn (2013) his dissertation on Jewish Christians and Jewish identity in Eastern Europe 1860-1914⁴. (The dissertation will soon be published in

¹ Acts 2,9-11

² Acts 17,1-15

³ Oskar Skarsaune in The Early centuries Jewish believers in Jesus (ed. O. Skarsaune and R. Hvalvik), Hendrickson Publishers 2007, p, 779

⁴ Raymond Lillevik: Apostates, Hybrids or True Jews), Dissertation, Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo 2013. <http://www.mf.no/doc//Dokumenter/2013/Disputaser/Endelig%20Lillevik,%20Apostates,%200103%202013.pdf>

English, and we plan a translation to Russian). His dissertation is a comparative analysis of three major and influential Jewish Talmudic scholars, two of them rabbis, who all became believers in Jesus, namely Chaim (Rudolf Hermann) Gurland (1831-1905), Chaim Jedidjah Pollak (Christian Theophilus Lucky) (1825-1908) and Ignatz (Isaac) Lichtenstein (1825-1908). These three represent, according to Lillevik's analysis, different solutions to the identity issue and the relationship to the Jewish community as well as the Church⁵.

A whole volume of the periodical Mishkan⁶ has presented the biography of Chaim Pollak, and the biography and bibliography of Isaac Lichtenstein is available online⁷. The debate of identity and expression of faith is exemplified through an article by dr. Kai Kjær-Hansen in Concordia Theological Quarterly, describing the debate and conflict of interest between Lichtenstein and the famous Jewish convert of Kishinev, Joseph Rabinowitz⁸.

My focus in this paper will therefore be on Chaim Gurland, also because he was the one among the three with closest relationship to my own organization, Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel.

Biography

Chaim Gurland was a Lithuanian Jew, born in Vilnius 1831.⁹ As son of a rabbi, he was expected to be his father's successor. From early age he was therefore educated in the Hebrew Bible as well as Talmud and Kabbalah, and got his rabbinical education from the seminar in Volozhin (1851), today's Belarus.

This was a time of conflict within East European Jewry. The traditionalists (mitnagdim or Talmudists) with strong emphasize on the authority of the Torah and Talmud, were in opposition to the Hasidic movement, with stronger emphasize on spiritual experience and lifestyle. In addition a new wave of the Enlightenment ideology (Hashkalah), with more rational, liberal and secular perspectives swept over Europe and created tensions towards the more religious groups.

The city of Wilkomir (Ukmerge), north-west of Vilnius, was a stronghold of the traditionalists, with more than 150 certified rabbis. Gurland happened to become rabbi and director of a synagogue in Wilkomir, and was installed on the 8th of March, 1854. He characterize this day as the worst day in his life. The reason for this is that Gurland came in opposition to the traditionalists as well as the hasidim, the Talmud and the Kabbalah. The Tanach should be the one and only authority for the Jewish faith.

According to the biography of Gurland, based on his own notes and written by his wife, Helene Gurland, the rabbi explains his position in this way:

You know what I think about the doctrines of Talmud and Kabbalah. For every day I am convinced that not only is a big part of Talmud and Kabbalah inauthentic, but also that they cannot be recognized as the Word of God, as they contradict themselves ... The Holy

⁵ Lillevik, p. 14

⁶ Mishkan issue 60/2009. Pasche Institute of Jewish Studies, Dallas.

⁷ <http://www.ha-gefen.org.il/en/aalphabetic%20presentation/c13764/64550.php>

⁸ Concordia Theological Quarterly, vol. 56 / 1992, p. 187. Concordia Theol. Sem. Fort Wayne. Electronic available: <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/kjaer-hansenrabinowitz.pdf>

⁹ Lillevik, p. 49 ff

Scripture has day by day become more holy and dear to me, while Talmud looks more like a gallery of characters without life ...¹⁰.



After less than three years service, Gurland left his position as rabbi. His marriage with the daughter of a Wilkomir rabbi was also annulled. For some years Gurland travelled around in the Jewish “Pale” area, trying to support himself as private teacher in calligraphy and sketching.¹¹

In this way, he ended up in Kishinev in 1863, where he met with pastor Ernst Karl Rudolf Faltin (1829-1918). Faltin was born in Riga, but was called to serve as an army chaplain and minister for the German protestant Diaspora Church in Kishinev and Bessarabia.

<http://jgsla.org/articles/tag/pale-of-jewish-settlement>

Conversion and ministry

Rev. Faltin had a strong concern for the Jewish people and a commitment to minister among them. Missionary work was forbidden for all denominations except for the majority church, the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, quite a number of Jews approached Faltin for teaching and baptism.

Gurland had received and read the New Testament in Hebrew a couple of years before his arrival in Kishinev, and – based on his reading of the Sermon on the Mount - he was convinced that Judaism contained the core of Christianity. Gurland’s contact and friendship with Faltin changed his opinion.

In his dissertation, Lillevik does not refer very much to the “conversion story” of Gurland, as it has been presented by the mission societies. But of course such stories are good for fundraising. Gurland was baptized by Faltin on 8th of May 1864 (in a couple of days we may celebrate his 150th “birthday”). According to German and Norwegian magazines, this is how the story of Gurland was presented in the congregation in Kishinev¹²:

One day a young Jewish man approached pastor Faltin, explaining that he was an unemployed rabbi giving private education in calligraphy. Could the pastor help him in identifying some students? Faltin did not succeed in finding students, but he suggested that Gurland might give him some private lessons in Hebrew. Gurland was willing to that, on one condition: That the pastor should avoid influencing him with any interpretation of the messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. Faltin agreed on that, but prayed even more intensively that God should open the eyes of the rabbi by their joint reading. Weeks went on,

¹⁰ Helene Gurland: In zwei Welten: Rudolf Hermann Gurland: Ein Lebensbild, Dresden 1911, p. 355ff, cfr. Lillevik p. 52.

¹¹ Oskar Skarsaune: Isarels Venner. Norsk arbeid for Israelsmisjonen 1844-1930. Oslo 1994, p. 139

¹² Misjonsblad for Israel 40/1866, p. 62

and they finished the Torah and the Prophets. On their second reading, they came to Isaiah 53. Faltin sensed that Gurland changed his attitude. In a reflective mood, he asked: Shouldn't we read the chapter once more? And they did. The rabbi left, but for the next lesson he had the same question: Should we repeat Isaiah 53 once more? After having read, Gurland commented: I do not why, but now I find so much in the Bible that I have never discovered before, even if I know the whole Old Testament by heart. This passage only corresponds with your Jesus. I am close being convinced that he is the promised Messiah. Then Faltin was "released", and could go through other prophecies, showing that Jesus is Messiah. Gurland was astonished that he had not seen all these things before and he expressed a confident faith, and started his preparation for baptism. The Jews of Kishinev knew that Gurland was teaching Faltin Hebrew, and rumors came up among them that the rabbi was close to convert his student to Judaism. It was quite an excitement when Gurland himself detonated the bomb: It is opposite.

After his conversion and baptism, Gurland spent three years in Berlin where he especially were in contact with and influenced by the Berlin Society for promoting Christianity among the Jews. This Society was established in 1822 as the first Jewish mission society on the European continent, inspired by the establishment of London Society (1809, later CMJ) and the Pietistic and Moravian movements. Gurland became a convinced Lutheran, and went back to Kishinev to serve as an assistant pastor for Faltin and a missionary to the Jews.

Gurland became the first missionary of the Norwegian Israel Mission (Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel). More than 50 % of the income was spent on contribution to the salary of Gurland for the years 1867-1876. He was also sponsored by German organizations, and later through the Zion Society for Israel, established by Norwegian immigrants in Minnesota, and the Mildmay Mission¹³. Gurland describes his missionary work with enthusiasm and warmth, mixed with several humorous anecdotes¹⁴, and he made several mission journeys to Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and the Baltic region.

In 1871 Gurland moved to Mitau in the the Baltic province of Courland (today Jelgava in Estonia) where he continued his missionary work, combined with a ministry as curate in the Lutheran church. As early as 1865, the synod of Lutheran churches in Courland discussed the issue of mission work among the Jews. One of the speakers, rev. W. Müller, "praised the Pietists and the Moravians for their concern on these matters, and describes mission work towards Jews as a matter of love."¹⁵ Even if we do not hear about a great number of people coming to faith, the 17 years of service in the Baltic region is probably the most satisfactory and successful period in his life. He travelled a lot, and had long conversations with influential Jews. He was also especially concerned of involving the churches in education by building schools for Jewish youngsters, especially girls.

After a couple of years serving as missionary in Riga, he ended his career in the multicultural city of Odessa, probably mostly due to health conditions. As representative of both the American and British Bible Societies, his main engagement was distribution of Bibles in Hebrew and Yiddish, but he was also asked to be take the position as superintendent for all missionaries of Mildmay Mission in western Russia. Due to the quite unexpected, but extensive, pogrom in Kishinev 1903 and other threats and actions against Jews in region, several refugees ended up in Odessa, and Gurland his remaining physical and psychological

¹³ Lillevik, p. 80

¹⁴ Lillevik, p. 65

¹⁵ Lillevik, p. 67

energy on relief work.¹⁶ His health declined, and he died in Odessa on 21st of May 1905. His body was brought back and buried in Mitau. So, this is the story of Gurland of Courland.

Numbers

In his dissertation Lillevik is referring to the studies of Alfred E. Thomson who states that the numbers of Jewish converts increased significantly during the 19th century, and reached the number of about 200.000 by the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁷ The reason for this is on one hand the European emancipation. Belonging to the official and dominant religion or church was “the key to social mobility”. On the other hand we know that this was also a period of intensive and organized Protestant (evangelical) mission among the Jews, and that the conversion was not only a move from nominal Judaism to nominal Christianity, but rather personal conviction and repentance.

According to Michael Stanislawski, (quoted by Lillevik)¹⁸ 41 percent of these 200.000 converts came from Russia. Among them (84.500), 69.400 were baptized into the Russian orthodox Church, 12.000 into the Roman Catholic Church, and 3.100 into different Protestant denominations, mostly Lutheran¹⁹. In other words: Speaking about Jewish believers in Jesus, we are primarily speaking about people belonging to traditional (historical) churches and adopting their theologies, liturgies and expressions of faith.

From the Lutheran point of view, we cannot avoid mentioning one of the great revivals of Kishinev. The Secretary of “Central Committee for Jødemissionen i Christiania” (later: Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel) and editor of our magazine, Peter Haerem, paid a visit to the mission societies in Germany in 1868, among them the Berlin Society and his colleague Kratzenstein. Here he heard about the ministry in Kishinev. He reports about the baptism of Gurland and the ministry of Rev. Faltin with enthusiasm²⁰:

In the period between 1st of October 1867 and 1st of October 1868 not less than 175 Jews were asking for education and baptism and in the following year the same number. After the Easter sermon by pastor Gurland in 1867, 50 Jews asked for being accepted as members of the Lord's Church. This is not motivated by material benefits, as long as we know the enmity towards Jews who will be baptized. They will be rejected by their parents and their community as well as being deprived of their occupation.

We may ask if this a too romantic presentation, interpreted for the audience of donors. We know the impact of such stories: The income of the Norwegian Committee increased substantially the following years due to the reports. It is also interesting to see that Gurland to a far extent confirms the presentation of Haerem for the Norwegian audience, in a situation where protestant mission work was not permitted. This is what he writes in a letter to the Board²¹:

They (Israelites) are not only approaching us individually, but 3, 4, 5, yes up to 10 Israelites at time, expressing their wish to be taught the way of salvation (ordo salutis), and by the holy

¹⁶ Lillevik, p. 87

¹⁷ Lillevik, p. 11

¹⁸ Michael Stanislawski: Jewish Apostasy in Russia. A tentative Typology, p. 192 / Lillevik p. 61

¹⁹ Lillevik, p. 61

²⁰ Misjonsblad for Israel 42/1868, p. 21

²¹ Skarsaune, p. 142

baptism being admitted within the bosom of the evangelical church ... I have this year (1868) so far not visited any Israelite. Nevertheless, all my time and resources have not been sufficient in meeting the needs of teaching and counseling among these Israelites. Therefore, we are urging you in the Central Committee, as well as all those who have an interest in the kingdom of God and a heart for Israel: Come and help us!

The stories and numbers are presented in a more objective – and probably more realistic – way if we study Joh. Le Roi's presentation of Jewish mission and Jewish converts in the 19th century²²:

During a period of four months in Kishinev, Gurland had 29 applicants for baptism. However, when it was revealed that hope of financial support from the church was a central motivation for most of them; only 5 young men were allowed to begin instruction for baptism. During the two and a half years he worked in the town, 320 Jews contacted him for baptismal instruction, but only 20 completed it.

Success and failures: What can we learn?

In evaluating the past, we need to be humble and careful. However, retrospectively we may try to understand the history out of its own context and learn how to adopt this learning, discussions, methods and strategies into our own context, including how to execute our new insight and understanding. In the following I will just point to some key issues which were relevant for Jewish believers in Jesus and mission societies in the 19th century, and I suppose are still relevant for the Messianic movement of today.

1. Church based mission or travelling satellites.

Organized mission among Jews in Europe started in the 18th century, and was inspired by the fathers of the Pietism revival and movement. In 1728 Johann Heinrich Callenberg established Institutum Judaicum at the university in Halle, Germany, with the main purpose of printing and distributing evangelistic broadsides and literature²³. In order to distribute the material and reaching out to the Jews, he also recruited theological students for travelling on mission journeys. By foot one among them, Stephan Schultz (1714-76), walked through most of the countries in Europe for 12 years, and after that ended up in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. He set out in 1740, and returned to Halle in 1760.

The methodology of sending travelling missionaries was adopted and organized by the Moravian movement, and later also by the London Society.

Another Institutum Judaicum was founded by Frantz Delitzsch in Leipzig (1886). Also in Berlin a separate institute at the university was dedicated for training students in Judaica and preparing them for missionary service. Delitzsch is also responsible for the first translation of New Testament to Hebrew language (1877) and founder of the German organization Zentralverein für Mission unter den Juden²⁴

²² Ler Roi: "Judentaufen im 19. Jahrhundert. Ein statistischer Versuch". Schriften des Institutum Judaicum in Berlin, no 27, Leipzig 1899 7 Lillevik p. 64.

²³ Skarsaune, p. 20f

²⁴ Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum, today located in Münster, and the mission organization Zentralverein, today Begegnung., have both lost the vision and mission of their founder, and are concentrating on research and dialogue, see <http://egora.uni-muenster.de/ijd/> and <http://www.israelsmisjonen.no/artikkel/article/2283>

We may say that Delitzsch renewed the German Lutheran church in its involvement in Jewish mission. In his magazine “Saat auf Hoffnung”, he states that the Lutheran church in the 19th century has drifted away from other evangelical churches regarding reaching Israel with the Gospel, and has forgotten the fruitful mission among the Jews from the 18th century (Callenberg)²⁵. At a mission conference in Berlin 1870, Delitzsche presented the blueprint for this renewal: First to establish education in Judaica at the universities, and secondly to offer relevant education to future missionaries among the Jews²⁶.

Delitzsch himself followed his principles, combined with a clearly developed strategy for Jewish mission: Instead of sending out “travelling missionaries”, the aim should be to build up confessional congregations, open to and attracting Jews. Jews could, and should even be encouraged to stay in their Jewish environment, but their spiritual home and base for mission, should be the congregation²⁷. In some ways this is a “middle road”. Converts should be received and admitted by the church, but without being totally assimilated. At the same time, some German mission leaders regarded this Leipzig strategy as an “obsession with philo-Semitism”.

2. Confessional adoption or independent Messianic fellowships

A main question was - and is therefore: Should Jewish believers in Jesus be adopted and integrated in the confessional churches, without necessarily being assimilated, or should they aim to establish and develop separate Messianic fellowships and congregations?

The question was very much discussed in the 19th century, especially as we see several educated converts with a strong identity in the Jewish and rabbinical tradition. Gurland decided to stay and serve in the church where he was baptized. According to Lillevik, Gurland identified with Lutheran pietism, with a strong Christocentric worldview and focus on the responsibility of every believer to follow the biblical commandments to minister.

On the contrary, the Hungarian rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein abstained from being affiliated with the church. He refused Christian baptism, probably because this would make him a member of a congregation²⁸. He explains his position this way²⁹:

I will remain among my own nation. I love Christ, I believe in the New Testament, but I am not drawn to Christendom ... I will remain among my own people, as a watchman from within, to warn them and to plead with them to behold in Jesus the true glory of Israel.

Lillevik is categorizing “the Messianic movement” in the southern part of the Russian empire in the 1880s in three groups³⁰: First, “The Israelites of the New Covenant” in Kishinev, founded by Joseph Rabinowitz³¹. They established their own community and prayer house for Jewish converts, keeping Jewish traditions and Shabbat observance, but with close contact with the Lutheran church and mission societies. Secondly, “New Israel” in Odessa, founded

²⁵ Skarsaune, p. 105f

²⁶ Skarsaune, p. 175

²⁷ Lillevik p. 284f

²⁸ Lillevik, p. 156

²⁹ Lillevik, p. 147

³⁰ Lillevik, p. 83

³¹ Kai Kjaer-Hansen: Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic movement. English translation: Eerdmans Publisher 1994

by Jacob Priluker. They abandoned Talmud, kosher observance and circumcision, and had Sunday services in Russian. The third group, “Spiritual Biblical Brotherhood”, founded in Elizavegrad by Jacob Gordin, also rejected Talmudic Judaism. This was a relatively small group with focus on agricultural labor, and was closed by the Russian police in 1891.

Also within the Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel, we had the debate. The Norwegian missionaries very much followed the “Leipzig strategy”, working through, or in partnership with, established congregations or churches. Gisle Johnson, who served in Galatz (Romania) 1903-19 and Budapest (1920-46), was a convinced Lutheran theologian and scholar. In Budapest he served as Lutheran pastor, but at the same time invited Jews and non-Jews for lectures and conversations on religious and philosophical topics. Together with some Jewish believers, he founded the Jewish Christian Society (Agudath Ma’aminim) in Budapest on the eve of Passover 1922, with the aim of strengthening the spiritual life and fellowship of Jewish Believers in Jesus³² However; this was not an attempt of separating Jewish believers from the confessional church, or establishing a Messianic church or congregation.

Another Norwegian missionary, Arne Jonsen, was of another opinion. As long as the Jewish people are living in the diaspora, the Torah and the synagogue are the institutions that bind them together and keep them alive. If these ties are broken, you also break off the connection with the people. His claim was therefore that Jewish mission in the diaspora is assimilation of Jews, and that they will lose their Jewish identity³³.

Without very much support from the Board of the mission, Jonsen got the permission of going to Palestine for doing a research of the possibility of establishing a ministry. The year after (1924) he moved together with his family with the vision of establishing a Messianic community in Jerusalem. Jonsen did not succeed, may be due to lack of support from his employer, or may be because Jewish believers already living in the land did not adopt his vision or idea of “bringing Jesus back to the synagogue”. The Executive of the Mission society describes, from his perspective, that the excitement decreased, and that even the “Jewish Christian congregation confirmed that this colonization in reality was a utopian failure”³⁴

Strategy issues are, and need to be, constantly discussed. What is right and what is wrong? The previous leader of the Messianic Jewish Alliance in Israel, dr. Gershon Nerel, was convinced that if the Norwegian mission really had given Arne Jonsen full support, we might have seen a greater Messianic movement in Israel today. He might be right, and might be wrong. What we know is that Jews came to faith in Jesus through confessional based mission organizations in Palestine in the 19th and 20th century, and it is also my conviction that these organizations have been important for the growth of the Messianic movement in Israel after the establishment of the state.

3. Ethics in communication and fundraising

What we also may learn from the past, is how we present our ministry and share information. Statistics and figures are not always telling the truth, because they often hide the reality. There are great varieties, or even differences in the numbers presented by the Secretary of the mission and Le Rooi’s research (see above). Jews approaching missionaries or showing interest

³² Laszlo G. Terray: ”Et liv i grenseland”. Gisle Johnson biography, Oslo 2003

³³ Skarsaune, p. 219 ff

³⁴ Chr. Ihlen: “Den Norske Israelsmisjons historie i hundre år 1844-1944”, p. 169

does not mean converts. Jews asking for teaching and baptism are not necessarily motivated by spiritual longing. This is a challenge for missionaries in the first line, as well as the leadership of the missions.

Over the last decades we have heard and read reports of the great revivals among Jews through campaigns and witness in Eastern Europe. No doubt that many Jews have come to faith after the “Iron curtain” fall, and that many of them have left for Israel, Germany and other countries and made impact on the growth of the Messianic movement in several countries. Despite this wave, I still see a difference about numbers presented some places and the results afterwards. We heard for example about hundreds of Jews coming to faith in Jesus in Hungary in the 1990s through festivals and campaigns, but are it possible to identify them today?

In Israel we have also seen a tendency to exaggerate numbers. We may understand why anti-missionary organizations want to point to high numbers in order to present the danger of missionaries. But why do we need to exaggerate?

In the 1990s we heard about 4-10.000 Messianic Jews in Israel, but nobody was able to confirm. That’s way Caspari center took the initiative to make a research. In the survey of 1998-99 Kai Kjaer-Hansen and Bodil Skjoett shows that the real number of Messianic Jews who are members of a Messianic house group or congregation is 2178 adults. If we add non-Jewish adults living in Jewish household (most of them married to a Jew), we come to 2.827³⁵. (Children and non-Jewish members of the congregations added, gives a total number of 4.957.)

We are not called to present ourselves more successful than The Holy Spirit. We therefore need to be factual and sober in the way we receive and interpret information, and humble and accountable in the way we transfer it. By saying this, we rejoice in the God’s grace and the privilege of being part of what God has been doing, and still does in order to bring His chosen people back to him and fulfill the promises He has given.

Rolf G. Heitmann
General Secretary
Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel
rolf@israelmisjonen.no

³⁵ Kai Kjaer-Hansen/Bodil Skjoett: ”Facts and Myths avout the Messianic Congregations in Israel, Caspari Center / Jerusalem 1999