

Article

# From Orthodox Christianity to “Jewish Law”: Unusual Conversion in the Russian Empire of the Early 19th Century

Tatiana Khizhaya 

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Vladimir State University Named after Alexander and Nikolay Stoletovs, Vladimir 600000, Russia; tatianahijaya@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This article is a piece of microhistorical research of a court case investigating religious conversion in Russia in the 1820s. It presents the story of an Orthodox Christian girl who adopted “Jewish law” and married a Jewish man. The article attempts to define the background and peculiarities of the conversion and clarify the context in which this was taking place. The work uses various methods: narrative, comparative, contextual analysis, text interpretation, etc. Analysis of the court case establishes that the girl’s change of faith was the result of: (1) close contacts with the Jews and lack of social ties within the Christian community; (2) poverty and extremely low social status; (3) lack of “religious capital”. Jewish social assistance practices, ways to legalize a new status, finding a job, and personal freedom turned out to be attractive to the serf woman. The novelty of this study involves the introduction of a previously unknown archival source representing a very rare phenomenon of conversion to Judaism in imperial Russia. In addition, the article presents the paradoxical case of an attempt at re-socialization by transitioning from the dominant confession to the faith of a religious minority and integration into a community whose rights in Russia were heavily curtailed.

**Keywords:** religious conversion; Judaism; conversion to Judaism; *giyur*; Jewish-Christian relations; Russian Empire; Jewish charity



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## 1. Introduction

This article describes a religious conversion that took place in the Russian Empire during the 1820s, the unusual story of an Orthodox Christian woman who tried to join the Jewish community, married a Jewish man, and participated in Jewish religious practices. The case analysis could contribute to the study of mechanisms and variations of conversion, Orthodox Christian and Jewish communities in the Tsarist Russia, and Judeo-Christian relations, including a complex and multilayered problem of conversion from Christianity to Judaism.

The topic of people’s conversion to Judaism from various other religions and denominations, along with the issue of Judaic proselytism, has always drawn scholarly attention. From biblical times through the ancient, medieval, and modern eras, and up to the present day, proselytes have remained the subject of research. Rare cases of collective *giyur* as well as more common cases of individual conversion have also been studied.

The phenomenon of conversion from Christianity to the Jewish faith in cultures where *giyur* was strictly prohibited is of special interest. The case in point are Christian states of Europe from the Middle Ages through the modern era. I am referring to full-scale acceptance of Judaism while excluding various Judaizing movements whose representatives could be more appropriately described as quasi-proselytes (Levinskaya 2000, pp. 94–95).

It is known that *giyur* was completely and ubiquitously prohibited in the Roman Empire after Christianity became Rome’s official religion. Naturally, compared to Antiquity, the number of conversions to Judaism sharply diminished, but the *ger*<sup>1</sup> phenomenon did not completely disappear.

Proselytes kept emerging in medieval times, although it is quite difficult to assess the scale and scope of *giyur*. K. Stow, for instance, chooses to discuss individual cases (Stow 1992, pp. 58–59). E.E. Urbach insists on the concept of a continuous conversion process based on mentioning converts from generation to generation, while also considering active anti-Judaic polemics, persistent Christian sermons and laws against *gers* (Urbach 2001, p. 18). G.S. Zelenina believes that fear of proselytism became the main reason (at least, the stated reason) for most expulsions of Jews from European countries (Zelenina 2011). Ya. Katz writes that the Jews of medieval Germany were prone to spreading Judaism (Katz 1993, p. 20). Scarcity of information about *gers* might be explained by unwillingness of both Christians and Jews to discuss the topic. Overall, accusations of missionary activities are strongly denounced by the Jewish tradition since energetic proselytism contradicts the victimization concept of Jewish existence in *galut* (Zelenina 2011).

In the late 15th century, the spread of messianic expectations amongst Spanish Jews could, according to some scholars, contribute to a more active proselytizing effort allegedly accelerating the Advent of the Redeemer (Zelenina 2008; Taube 2005).

During the early modern period, halachic thinking developed a negative attitude towards *giyur*, while attempts to convert anyone to Judaism became very rare. Ya. Katz explains that change by the following factors: 1. Fear of persecution and pressure on the part of Christian governments; 2. Increasing isolation of Jews bringing about their conviction that the barriers between the two worlds are insurmountable; 3. Less hostile perception of Christianity by the Jews (Katz 1993, pp. 31–37). The latter phenomenon, in its turn, became the reaction to the trend of tolerance toward the Jews being generated among political elites and supporters of the Enlightenment, starting from the 17th century. In this particular period Christianity stopped being perceived as idolatry, and Christians were classified as בני נח (Noah's descendants) who were not obliged to convert to Judaic faith. Thus, rejection of proselytism became ideologically substantiated. That attitude was further supported by the ideas of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment) emphasizing Jewish tolerance. The process resulted in the predominance of Judaic indifference toward the religious destinies of the world surrounding them: "The Jews were no longer chasing proselytes" (Katz 1993, p. 34).

However, the *giyur* phenomenon did not wane completely even during this period. *Gers* were working in Jewish print shops in a number of European cities. At the end of the 15th century, two former Christian monks who had converted to "Jewish faith" were discovered in Jerusalem (Katz 2001, pp. 19–20). In 1696 Johann Peter Spaeth, later known as Moses Germanus, a Christian mystic from Augsburg, was circumcised and married a Jewess (Coudert 2004, pp. 71–121). Two Christian women who had converted to Judaic faith were executed in 1716 in Dubno, in Rzeczpospolita territory (Katz 2001, p. 20). There has also been a Jewish cultural narrative of a righteous *ger*, a Polish nobleman turned martyr named Valentine Pototzki who was burnt alive in Vilno in 1749 on the sentence of a church trial. Although some scholars believe the story of Pototzki to be a legend, it is nonetheless a piece of evidence proving that the border between two worlds, Jewish and Christian, was permeable (Teter 2005, pp. 237–63).

Conversions of this type were quite rare in the Russian Empire. They were severely punished. As early as 1649 the Council Code envisaged the danger of a Russian person being converted to "infidel faith" and circumcised. "Seducers" were sentenced to being burnt alive, while the "seduced" were referred to the Patriarch to be assigned punitive measures by the church (Tikhomirov and Yepifanov 1961, p. 292). However, the broader legal interpretation applicable under the rule of Empress Anna Ioannovna (1730–1740) could result in not only the "seducers", but also those who got circumcised being executed. There is a known case of Aleksandr Voznitsyn, a marine officer who was publicly burnt in 1738 for conversion to the Jewish faith (Feldman 2005). Even after capital punishment for faith renunciation was no longer enforced, rejecting Orthodox Christian faith and seducing people into non-Christian religion were considered criminal offenses; throughout the 19th century, the guilty parties could, depending on the circumstances, be subject

to various punishments: imprisonment, forced labor, compulsory military service, legal disenfranchisement, and exile.

In 1748–1749, the city of Kazan saw an investigation based on the testimony of a tradesman (*posadskii chelovek*), T. Nesterov, who accused several city dwellers of espousing “Jewish law in a concealed manner”. He testified that they had been circumcised and were keeping Jewish books in their homes as well as seducing Christians, including himself, to Judaism. Even though the investigation remained futile, it is still unclear how the informer could have known the prayer in Hebrew allegedly taught to him by the “seducers”. The text of the prayer was recorded in Russian transliteration during the investigation and preserved in the archival document (Feldman 1999, pp. 296–323).

We should keep in mind that whenever *giyurs* of this type occurred, they were thoroughly concealed and never recorded in Jewish communities.

Yu. I. Gessen gives an example of a complaint about “seducing” two Catholic women and a priest in Mogilyov Province into Judaism which was filed in 1817 by a Jew named Kornblum. One of the women indeed confessed that she had converted to Judaism under the name of Dvora. Another one and the priest were not found. The case in question was never fully investigated, and some of the people involved in it died under mysterious circumstances. Gessen draws a conclusion about the uniqueness of those cases (Gessen 1916, pp. 399–402). The scholar also mentions a handful of similar accusations dating back to the early decades of the 19th century: a case of two Christian girls serving in the homes of Jews in the town of Vidza who were converted to Judaism; religious pressure exerted by the Jews of Tavria on Christians living in their homes; adoption of Jewish customs by the women of Kherson Province; anti-Christian influence of a certain Jewish doctor on a Polish nobleman (Gessen 1916, p. 402). Unfortunately, those cases were never meticulously studied.

Given the unique nature and vagueness of such events, it was very valuable for me to discover the following investigative file. It showcases a phenomenon of an Orthodox Christian female resident of the Russian Empire joining the Jewish community in the early 19th century. The case is remarkable first, for containing a proven accusation of “turning to the Jewish law”, and second, for covering the story in great detail. The uniqueness of the event is further amplified by a double felony from the standpoint of Russian law of the time: not merely conversion from Christianity to Jewish faith, but also a marriage, according to Jewish customs, between a girl of Orthodox Christian descent and a Jew.

This article attempts to define the background and peculiarities of the religious conversion model specified by the archival record of a court case, as well as to clarify the context where the conversion was taking place.

Methodologically, this research considers the religious conversion concepts developed in the works by J. Lofland and R. Stark (Lofland and Stark 1965), R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge (Stark and Bainbridge 1987), R. Stark and R. Finke (Stark and Finke 2000).

First of all, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term “conversion”. The aforementioned authors have offered a number of definitions. J. Lofland and R. Stark wrote in 1965: “When a person gives up one . . . perspective or ordered view of the world for another we refer to this process as conversion” (Lofland and Stark 1965, p. 862). In 1987, R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge defined conversion as “affiliation of a person to a new religious group conceptualized as a positive transformation of the nature and value of the person” (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, p. 197). Instead of the term “conversion”, which suggests, according to them, a “radical, perhaps supernatural transformation in the nature of a person”, they offered a more neutral term, “affiliation”. This is a “two-sides process of recruiting-joining” and does not indicate changes occurring in the individual’s inner world (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, pp. 195–96). In 2000, R. Stark and R. Finke used the term “conversion” to describe “‘long-distance’ shifts in religious allegiance, those involving a shift across traditions, such as from Judaism or Roman paganism to Christianity, from Christianity to Hinduism, or from the religion of the Nuer to Islam” (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 114).

Although in the case that will be described below it would be more reasonable, within the framework of Stark and Bainbridge's concept, to refer to "affiliation", I also use the more customary term, i.e., "conversion". What I mean by conversion is an individual's transition from one religion to another, regardless of the reasons why it occurred. The term is used in the parlance of the source that I discovered ("conversion to Jewish law"), and in a number of scholarly works in a neutral and plain meaning of this word. For instance, it is common to refer to the Jews of the Russian Empire who accepted Christianity due to socio-economic rather than religious reasons as converted Jews, and to describe their baptism as conversion (See: [Stanislawski 1987](#), pp. 189–205).

## 2. Materials and Methods

The subject of my research is a story reflected in an investigation and court case featuring an Orthodox Christian woman who "turned to Jewish law" and married a Jewish man. I discovered this document in the Russian State Historical Archive (the city of St. Petersburg) in the General Affairs Department fund of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire ([According to the Report 1825](#)).

It is noteworthy that microanalysis concentrated on personal confessions is most valuable for the study of religious conversion in the past. This is the way to examine a conversion experience to the full extent possible when there is no opportunity for field research. A microhistorical approach is intended to enrich macro-sociological analysis, offer more of its varieties, more complex and mobile. In a given historical context, the case below is an original and rare example of an individual conversion from one faith to another.

The methods of research consider the nature of the source containing descriptions of the suspects' and witnesses' interrogations, requests, reports, and conclusions drawn by the officials of the Russian Empire during the early 19th century. For the most part, this is paperwork of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Official documentation, its restrictions and dryness notwithstanding, still allows us to hear the live voice of an illiterate peasant girl as well as her Jewish environment. The work uses classical analysis tools for archival clerical materials, that is, narrative and contextual analysis methods, comparative study, text interpretation, clarifying logic and content of the source, etc.

## 3. The Case of Mariya Guleva, a Peasant Woman

The case was first examined in the local court bodies in the western provinces of Russia, and then by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Senate. The people involved were a girl from Podolia, her Jewish husband, and a number of Jews living in the Kiev Province.

The story, as reflected in the suspects' interrogations and the officials' reports, is as follows.

The main person involved was a serf woman, Mariya Guleva, of the village of Suslovet in the Letichev Povet (district) in Podolia Province. She was 20 at the start of the investigation in 1821. At the age of 8, the girl had lost her mother, and, for some time, she was being brought up by her grandmother, Melania Kovalikha, a peasant woman. As the grandmother was desperately poor, she had to hand Mariya over to a fellow villager as a servant girl. Having spent four years in the villager's family, the girl headed to a district town of Letichev without letting her master know. Mariya's father, Ignat Gulya, had been living there as a hired hand in a Jewish home. A significant Jewish community is known to have existed in Letichev during the early half of the 19th century ([Letichev 1911](#)). Ignat had assigned his daughter as a servant girl to a *kahal* elder, Moshko Korkhin the Beardy ("Borodach"), in whose house she lived for quite a long period of time. The persons involved all indicate a different length of her service: 6 or 7 years (Mariya herself), 3 years (Ignat), 2 years (Moshko). The length of service was negotiated by Ignat. Upon its completion, the now adult girl left the Jewish family and worked a few weeks for a peasant woman, Nastasia Kozubyaka, who lived in the town. It is unclear if she lived elsewhere, but eventually wound up serving a noblewoman, Sofia Bagnitskaya, who took her to the

Kiev Province. Mariya did not get along well with her new lady master, she indicated that she had been mistreated by her. Three months later, the girl left her house with an “unknown man” who promised to take her to the location she needed. The source remains silent about the location’s whereabouts. Mariya may have had some plans for the future or she may have been traveling without a specific goal.

It was during that travel, the suspect testified, that the key event had happened. The unknown man allegedly abandoned his fellow traveler in the steppe for an inability to pay for her ride. The girl had to spend a night under open skies, and then walk alone without any direction. On her way, she allegedly came across a dray cart carrying a family comprised of a Jew named *Abramka*, his wife, *Yeysya*, and a little baby. According to a different version (Mariya was probably getting confused with her testimony or her responses were not properly recorded), *Yeysya* is presented as an old Jewess who later referred to Mariya as her granddaughter. The girl asked for a ride, and the Jew agreed on the condition that she “turn to the Jewish faith”. Then, “in order not to roam idly any more, she agreed to the Jew *Abramka*’s offer”. This is how the conversion occurred, according to the story’s main figure. During the investigation, Mariya did not provide any detail about the process of conversion to Judaism. What is known is that she changed into Jewish clothes and was traveling from village to a village with her companions.

Two weeks later, the cart arrived in the *Shtetl* Rakitna of the Vasilkov district, Kiev Province. There, the whole crew stayed in the so-called “Jewish hospital”, that is, an almshouse, a free hotel for the sick and the poor. This institution is referred to as *hekdesh* in the Jewish tradition. There were some Jews there begging for alms, and they took Mariya Guleva for a Jewess since *Abramka* was calling her *Sura* or *Haya-Sura* and introduced her as his relative. The investigative file also points out that Mariya was living in a bathhouse or in a place attached to it, where, according to Jewish witnesses, “such people are supposed to live”. According to N. Meir, a scholar of marginalized groups in the Jewish community of Eastern Europe in the 19th century, the *hekdesh* often shared the same building with a public bathhouse or was located next to it (Meir 2020, p. 71).

After some time (three weeks later, according to the testimony of one of the interrogated Jewish women) the newly emerged Jewess was married off to a Rakitna resident, Ges Kushnir, an impoverished Jew with poor eyesight. He might have remained single due to his unenviable material circumstances and bodily flaw. Mariya turned out to be a suitable party for him. Two local Jewish women, Leah, wife of the barber, Yukel Brostovsky, and Mariya, wife of the bath attendant, Moshe Lazebnik the Blind, advised that Ges “marry the newly arrived maiden based on their shared poverty”. Neither Ges, nor any other Jews had any doubts about the origin of the maiden: she was “wearing Jewish clothes” and “speaking Jewish tongue like a natural-born Jewess”. She called herself *Haya-Sura*, daughter of Meir. The interrogated Jews also pointed out that some old Jewess who had arrived in Rakitna with Mariya, had been referring to her as her granddaughter. They claimed that the Jew (*Abramka*?) who had brought Mariya and the aforementioned old Jewess (*Yeysya*?) had departed in an unknown direction after some time.

In the meantime, Ges Kushnir’s father gave his consent for the marriage and sent matchmakers, the bathhouse attendant and the barber, to Mariya. She accepted Ges’s proposal.

Since the bride was dirt poor, three Jewish women, the aforementioned Leah, Haya, Moshko’s wife, and Ruhlya, Shimon’s wife, went around homes of the *shtetl* to collect alms for the maiden’s wedding gown as well as the food. The Jews were giving “whatever they could afford”. The groom’s father was also involved in preparations for the upcoming event.

The wedding ceremony—“poor Jewish wedding”—was held in the “Jewish shrine”, i.e., the synagogue, in the presence of “many Jews”. It was performed by a rabbi, *dukhovny*<sup>2</sup>, and a cantor (“*spevak*”). The newlyweds were issued a marriage certificate and then everybody enjoyed a meal in the home of Brostovsky, the barber. After the wedding, Mariya and Ges stayed for two weeks in the home of the husband’s aunt (the husband’s

father, according to another source), and later moved to an “apartment” specially rented from one of Rakitna residents.

Mariya had a half-truth “legend” of her own: she was an orphan who had lost her parents “since early childhood” and was brought up by her grandmother. These circumstances suggested she “was roaming around seeking food and alms until she reached the age of maturity”. She never mentioned her place of birth or her mother’s and grandmother’s names.

The marriage proved to be short-lived. The spouses lived together for 4 or 5 months, then parted ways. It was Mariya who initiated the divorce; she had probably been counting on her husband to provide sustenance for her but saw her expectations’ futility. She asked those who had performed the marriage ceremony to give her a divorce certificate. Having seen the valid reason for the divorce, they consented. The divorce letter obtained later by the investigation named Mariya Haya-Sura, the daughter of Meir. Having the document on hand, the girl got a ride from Rakitna to the city of Uman with some Jewish travelers.

In Uman, Mariya-Sura was hired as a cook for a Jew, Shimka Mordkovich. Having spent just a month there, she stayed at the “Jewish almshouse” (that is the *hekdesht*) again, then found a servant job in the home of Yankel Aksensfeld, a resident of Uman, upon presenting her *get* (divorce letter) to him. She lived there for three months, and it was there that the history of her Jewish-ness came to an end. According to Aksensfeld’s testimony, the new employee had blurted out to her master’s children that her father was a Christian. Having found out about that, he reported it to the Uman assemblyman representing the petty owners estate (*meshchane*), Mordke Lande; Lande, in his turn, reported that to the Mayor. The suspect herself claimed that the master had learned her true story from some Jewish women to whom she had blurted it out. When she wanted to leave Aksensfeld, he decided to get back at her, and made a report to the Uman Mayor.

Thus, Mariya Guleva was arrested and gave a “voluntary” confession to the police. When interrogated, the suspect claimed that initially she had been reluctant to acknowledge her Christian origin but had been “intimidated and beaten up”. The Mayor “hit her on the back with a stick twice and about ten times on the cheeks with his hand”.

Later, in the Uman prison, Mariya confessed and received communion from a visiting priest. That was how she returned to Orthodox Christianity.

The case of a Christian woman who had “renounced the Greek-Russian faith” and married a Jew was wandering through various court and church institutions of Russia for a long time. The initial investigation was started by the Uman police, later handing the case file over to Vasilkov district court as the crime had been committed in the Vasilkov district. The Vasilkov court sentenced Mariya to “corporal punishment and eternal church repentance” for “turning over from Christian to Jewish faith”. However, the Main Court of Kiev where the case was filed for appeal referred it to the Kiev Religious Dynasteria<sup>3</sup> as it ruled that the suspect’s crime was within the realm of religious authority. The Dynasteria suggested treating the suspect in accordance with Rule 81 of St. Basil the Great. According to that rule, those who had renounced the faith under duress were subject to 8-year penance, and those who had done so at their own will—to a 12-year penance. Thus, Mariya was supposed to be prohibited from taking Holy Communion for 12 years for voluntary renunciation of Christianity. Marrying a Jew was classified as fornication. It is noteworthy that marriage in the Russian Empire was a strictly religious institution for all religions and denominations, while marriages of Orthodox Christians and non-Christians were prohibited until 1905 and viewed as criminal offences (Werth 2008, pp. 300–3; Freeze 1990). According to religious authorities, that offence was subject to the civil authorities’ jurisdiction. The Kiev Metropolitan Evgeniy (Bolkhovitinov), a well-known church historian and public figure, stated his opinion about what had happened. He explained that “as the case involves a Jew who seduced a woman belonging to the Greek-Russian faith, and the marriage itself was kahal-certified, it has to be probed initially not by the Dynasteria but rather by the Civil Authority, and then the penance shall be applicable in accordance with its ruling”. Thus, he wanted to clarify the issue of the measure of the suspect’s guilt, pointing out the

Jew as the primary culprit, and delineating the realms of civil and church punishment. The case file was returned to the Main Court of Kiev which ruled that “Guleva who was exposed as a person who had renounced the Greek-Russian faith, accepted Judaism and married a Jew . . . shall be referred to the Kiev Religious Dynasteria for examination”. The Kiev Governor, while agreeing with that ruling, still presented the case file to the Ministry of Internal Affairs as it was too important. However, minister Vasily Lanskoï declined to perform the examination, as it was not related to the cases of “raskolniks” (religious dissidents)<sup>4</sup>, and the Governor referred it to the highest level of legal authority, the Senate. Unfortunately, I did not manage to discover the outcome of that complicated story.

A parallel investigation was opened, involving the Jews suspected of committing the crime, that is Ges Kushnir and other participants of the story we are already familiar with. Ges was accused of marrying a Christian “maiden”, and the others were accused of participating in the marriage ceremony. Their case was tried separately at the Vasilkov low-level community (zemskaï) court. Later, it was transferred first into the city magistrate court, and then to the Main Court of Kiev.

All the Jews were unanimously stating that they had been unaware of Guleva’s Christian origin: she spoke Yiddish fluently, was clothed properly and prayed “the Jewish way”. That is why they were not accused but “left in suspicion”. The Kiev court sentenced them to paying the fine for “receiving and accommodating Guleva without papers”. The money was appropriated by the treasury since Maria’s master, a well-known Russian diplomat, Count A.I. Morkov, did not sue the Jews for “retaining” his serf.

The authorities were certainly concerned about revealing the main culprits of a dangerous and rare crime. It was necessary to clarify all of the circumstances, and that is why the primary persons involved and all of the suspects were subject to a number of interrogations. It was essential to reveal the aforementioned Abramka and Yeysya who had allegedly coerced Mariya to change her faith. The initial suspicion fell on a Rakitna resident, Avrum Shaiinskii “based on the name resemblance” with the alleged seducer’s name. It turned out, however, that he had moved to Rakitna fairly recently, and knew personally neither Ges Kushnir, nor Mariya. He had been out of town during the wedding, his wife’s name was Fruma, not Yeysya, and they did not have children. Therefore, the story of a couple with a child told by Mariya had nothing to do with him.

It was also important to understand what the actual conversion to Judaism had entailed and at what point it had happened. The authorities must have suspected that the defendant had made up the episode with Abramka, and that was probably true, in order to mitigate her punishment since it turned out she had been coerced to renounce her faith. In order to clarify the religious component of the story, the investigation interrogated not only Mariya and the Jews, but also her grandmother, some peasants from her village (11 people total), and Nastasia Kozubyaka whom she had served in Letichev. They confirmed that the girl had served the Jews, but had not displayed any inclination for the Jewish faith: she had been espousing Christianity when living in Letichev. The grandmother pointed out that, due to the girl’s service in the Jewish home, she “spoke Jewish skilfully”. The Letichev kahal elder, Moshko, in whose house Mariya Guleva had served before her conversion, was assuring that his former employee “had always been observing holidays in accordance with the Christian religion and attended the confession”. Mariya herself acknowledged that during her marriage and her stay in the home of Aksenfeld, “she had not been observing any Christian rituals but observing all the Jewish ones, and praying to God the Jewish way”. Her ex-husband stated that “she had performed all prayers the Jewish way and known them by heart”.

The defendant was trying to whitewash herself and was progressively “clarifying” some details of her story. For instance, while she was staying in the Kiev Religious Dynasteria, she kept emphasizing that she had not had any way out other than conversion during her travel in the steppe. That is why she had given false consent to accept the “Jewish law” to “announce that to the authorities” upon her arrival to some place. Yet, as we see, that never happened. Mariya presented her divorce story as an attempt to return to

Orthodox Christianity. However, she failed to explain why she had continued to present herself as a Jewess.

Guleva was kept in custody from 1821 to 1826. The Minister of Internal Affairs asked the Governor of Kiev why the woman was in custody for so long. The governor explained that she could have been released during the investigation, but no one was willing to bail her out. All of the Jewish suspects, however, were not in custody, but on bail.

#### 4. Analysis

The scenario of the peasant woman's conversion is mostly within the framework of the conversion model described by D. Lofland and R. Stark ([Lofland and Stark 1965](#), pp. 864–74). The scholars suggested the seven-step pattern, and six of them, it seems to me, are applicable to Mariya's conversion.

(1) "Tension". A person experiences "enduring, acutely felt tensions". Mariya was deprived of parental love and care, and of any reliable social status and material income; she certainly experienced deprivation and was in a state of tension.

(2) "Type of problem-solving perspective". We could suppose that joining the Jewry had been preceded by some attempts to find a way out of the situation. Indeed, Mariya's independent departure from her first master, her co-villager, and asking for help from her father were the sign of her seeking a better life.

(3) "Seekership". We do not know anything about Mariya's personal religious quest.

(4) "The turning point". That turning point was apparently the period spent by the character of our story in the Jewish family.

(5) "Cult affective bonds". Here, we are talking about the emotional bonds with representatives of a different religion. It is extremely important that Mariya lived in the Jewish environment since childhood, and that environment inevitably became familiar and understandable for her. We have to keep in mind how much time she spent there. Mariya referred to six or seven years which may sound realistic. The document does not clarify why she left her masters. She may have been needed only for a specified period of time, or the family could no longer afford a servant, or there was an interpersonal conflict. I have one more hypothesis, however. The matter is that, in 1820, the Senate of the Russian Empire issued a decree banning the Jews from having Christian servants. The promulgation of the decree resulted, first, from a short report made by the Minister of Religious Affairs and Public Education, A.N. Golitsyn, on the acceptance of Jewish customs and rituals by female servants in the Jewish homes of Kherson Province, and, second, from an investigation of a sect of Judaizers in Voronezh province. ([Speransky 1830](#), pp. 175–77). We could suggest that Mariya's departure was a consequence of that prohibition. The story of our character's conversion, her wanderings, marriage and further work in two Jewish homes fits approximately into the time frame between the issuance of the law in April 1820 and her arrest in October 1821. That means that the girl stayed at Moshko's home roughly from the age of 12–13 until the age of 19.

Within 6–7 years of maturing, the girl could learn the language spoken by her masters, become immersed in a different cultural environment and partake in Judaic religious practices. It was during that period that the pre-conversion, and, possibly, even total conversion of Mariya might have actually occurred.

An indirect confirmation of this suggestion could be deduced from cases mentioned by Yu. I. Gessen, who discusses Christian servants living in Jewish homes and being subject to the influence of the Jewish tradition. They became the rationale for the Senate decree under discussion. This method of conversion is millennia-old: in accordance with the Torah and certain Talmudic pieces, it was prescribed that Gentile slaves be circumcised and immersed in Jewish homes as food and wine cooked by heathens' hands were considered impure, just like everything they touched. In time of Antiquity, slavery was used as a tool of conversion to Judaism. If masters led a number of their slaves 'under the wings of Shekhinah' they contributed to the growth of 'God's glory' according to Midrash Sifre ([Hezser 2005](#), pp. 35–41). That millennia-old turn of events could serve as an archetype for gijyurs in other periods



of history as well. For instance, a recent study by Aviva Ben-Ur dedicated to the Jews of Surinam in the 17th through the 19th centuries, including the ethnogenesis of Eurafrikan Jews, demonstrates that the Jewish slave owners were converting their slaves, and the children born to them by their female slaves to Judaism. Aviva Ben-Ur believes that the said phenomenon was larger in scale than it has usually been portrayed in both historiography and Jewish communal self-representations (Ben-Ur 2020).

(6) “Extra-cult affective bonds”. “Extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized”, meaning the weakening of ties outside the new religious community and their gradual disappearance. With the lack of true family care and attention, which is the primary social ties in the micro-social environment, Mariya could easily part with the traditional way of life she had been accustomed to during her childhood in her grandmother’s house. She had lost her mother very early, and she had not seen her father much until a certain age. Apparently, her father was not involved in bringing her up or even in providing for her, as the grandmother was unable to feed her. Another important factor was that her father had been working for the Jews for a number of years. The fact that no one was willing to bail her out during the investigation highlights the lack or at least an obvious shortage of family or friendly relations.

Mariya’s co-villagers claimed she “had espoused Christianity”, and her first Jewish master, Moshko the Beardy, insisted that she had been observing Orthodox Christian holidays and gone to confessions. Formal involvement in church life (that is primarily a confession and a holy communion once a year) in the Russian Empire of the 19th century were often strategies of concealment of an actual belonging to a different faith. Such practices were, for instance, common among Russian sectarians.

(7) “Intensive interaction”, which leads to the “total conversion”. In this particular case, stage five was smoothly merging into stage seven as Mariya was living in the home of the kahal elder, and thus had a “concrete, daily, and even hourly accessibility” (Lofland and Stark 1965, p. 873) to Jews. Since she had settled there, she was exposed to the prolonged direct influence of representatives of a different religion. Otherwise, it is impossible to explain her excellent command of Yiddish and ability to pray in Hebrew. We know that later she lived with Kushnir for 4 or 5 months. During that time, she might have demonstrated her ability to cook kosher food and observance of the laws of family purity as well as participation in the Sabbath ritual and various Jewish holidays. She could have learned all of this only in the family of her Jewish master. It should be noted that the girl was in the center of attention of not just her husband, but of the whole community, as that usually happened in pre-modern society, and her “Jewishness” was not questioned by anyone.

The source does not clarify the issue of the timing of Mariya’s final conversion. During her interrogations, she insisted on the version of forced conversion. However, it is very probable that the “seducer” narrative was made up by her to avoid being held responsible for her crime. Taking into account the laws of the Russian Empire, it is difficult to imagine the representatives of a discriminated religious minority who were, on top of everything else destitute, were forcing the girl to accept their faith. Keep in mind that the modern era saw a general trend of the Jewish refusal to proselytize. However, the momentous encounter in the “steppe” might have actually happened, albeit not in the manner described by Mariya. Having found herself in a difficult situation, abandoned by her fellow traveler, she could have pretended to be a Jewess at her own will and joined a party of marginalized Jews begging for alms. Evidently, Mariya did not arrive in Rakitna alone.

It should be emphasized that conversion to Judaism in that case signifies Mariya’s actual participation in the Jewish religious practices. We know nothing about Mariya’s passing *giyur* which could have been the culmination of her conversion.

One important step absent in Mariya Guleva’s case is religious seekership. At least the source does not provide any information about that. Her conversion model was profoundly social in nature, while we know nothing about Mariya’s personal religiosity except for its formal aspect: she knew Hebrew prayers by heart and performed Judaic rituals, which was confirmed by herself and by a number of witnesses. That suggests

that Mariya's story is not so much religiously motivated conversion to Judaism, as it is joining the Jewish community, which brought about her involvement in its religious life in a natural way. It is notable that this pattern is in full accordance with one of the two approaches to *giyur* existing in Halachic tradition. According to this approach, *giyur* is first and foremost a ritual of a non-Jew joining the community of Israel, not acceptance of Judaic religion; religious obligations are applied to *ger* as a result of joining the Jewry (Zogar and Sagi 2001, pp. 24–28, 30–32).

In a way, our character's conversion could be clarified using the approach developed by R. Stark and W.S. Bainbridge within the framework of the rational choice theory (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, pp. 195–238). The researchers drew their attention to the significance of social ties for the process which they called "affiliation". They believe that people turn to religion because it provides "compensators" if a certain "reward" is lacking. They suggested that "persons may affiliate with cults and sects without a prior state of active searching" (Stark and Bainbridge 1987, p. 223). "Compensators" they receive are not perceived in religious terms but as tools of supporting desirable social conditions. The case of Mariya Guleva is a marvelous example of this phenomenon.

The work of R. Stark and R. Finke insists even more on the idea that the conversion is pre-determined largely by emotionally significant relationships with adepts of a religious community and the absence of such relationships outside of that community (Stark and Finke 2000, pp. 114–40). The scholars claim that "under normal circumstances, most people will neither convert nor re-affiliate". That is why "children usually adhere to the faith of their parents and relatives. By doing so, they protect their kinship ties" (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 119). The scholars refer to interpersonal attachments as "social capital". The story we discuss testifies to the fact that the most significant "social capital" was accumulated by Maria during her stay in the Jewish family while her kinship relationships, along with other possible ties inside Orthodox Christian community, were either completely broken or weakened. Most probably, the girl's "religious capital" (if we use that concept's discourse) before her encounter with Judaism had been quite insignificant, as there was no one available in her family to nurture her religiosity.

R. Stark and R. Finke come to a rather radical conclusion as they determine the importance of religious seekership in the process of conversion: "In fact, converts very seldom are religious seekers, and conversion is seldom the culmination of a conscious search—most converts do not so much find a new faith as the new faith finds them" (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 122). "Conversion is really a matter of re-socialization, rather than choice, and in that sense, converts are more or less passive victims of social processes beyond their grasp and control" (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 135). In view of this concept, we should not be surprised by the absence of religious seekership stage in the process of the character's conversion. On the other hand, I cannot exclude it completely: let me point out again that we do not have any information about that. The source's peculiar nature (not a field study, but a rather dry two-hundred-years-old official document) would not let us deeply penetrate Mariya's inner world.

Probably due to the lack of distinct religious motives, Mariya's return to Orthodox Christianity was quick and easy. She displayed no persistence in defending her new identity, unlike, for example, many Judaizing sectarians accused of renouncing Christianity who were willing to engage in doctrinal disputes with the priests trying to "expostulate" them (Khizhaya 2014).

Thus, social motives of conversion were predominant in the given case. Some comments on the social welfare concept in Judaism will help us toward gaining a deeper understanding of Mariya Guleva's behavior.

Care of the impoverished had a religious foundation in Judaic society: it was directly prescribed by Halacha. The specifics of charity as an important element of the Jewish community's traditional way of life depended on the social and historical context. The ultimate authority of the social assistance system in the Jewish communities in Russia during the early half of the 19th century were the kahals, and the system was funded

mostly by the proceeds of the *korobka*, i.e., by the kosher meat tax. The kahals were establishing and controlling charitable foundations covering a wide range of activities, from paying for upkeep of the synagogues to providing welfare payments to the poor. A charitable foundation often funded a *hekdesht*, an almshouse sheltering newly arriving impoverished people, the old, and the sick (Löwe 1997, pp. 54–55). It was in such a *hekdesht* that Mariya found herself twice, and it is not a mere accident that the source calls it both an almshouse and a hospital, as, initially, a *hekdesht* was intended for housing the sick, but later became a shelter for destitute vagrants.

Before kahals were abolished, the *hekdesht* maintenance rules had often required a charitable community leader or a doctor to check on the residents of the shelter on a regular basis, normally twice a week, and an oversight director had been required to do that twice or three times a day. N. Meir believes that such a strict management policy, even if it was not always being conducted according to the letter of the ordinances, suggested order and good maintenance of the institution (Meir 2020, p. 64). Worsening of the situation in almshouses started to occur during the second half of the 19th century, after the kahals had been abolished (Meir 2020, pp. 65–68). What was important was the practical absence of any term restrictions on *hekdesht* stays (Stampfer 2010, p. 91).

Private charitable activities were also quite vibrant. The kahals controlled and channeled private initiatives allowing, for instance, various *hevrotot* (charitable fraternities) to collect money in synagogues on certain days (Löwe 1997, pp. 55–56). The *hevrotot* gave out food to the poor, organized collection of dowry for poor brides, supplied the destitute people with matzot during Pesach, ensured education for impoverished boys, orphans, etc. Charitable societies were headed by the most affluent residents of a *shtetl* who donated large amounts of money (Beiser 2009). Some women, the so-called *gabete*, were completely dedicated to philanthropy (Löwe 1997, p. 55; Meir 2020, p. 65). There was a tradition of the wealthy community members inviting the poor to their dinner table, particularly on Sabbath and other religious holidays (Löwe 1997, p. 56).

Although historiography contains diverse assessments of the Jewish charities in Russia in the 19th century that at times contradict one another, its accomplishments are undeniable (Meir 2020, pp. 18–19). We should keep in mind that, in addition to the motivation of religion and personal ambitions, urging rich Jews to engage in philanthropy, maintaining and supporting Jewish identity was also an important stimulus (Meir 2020, p. 147).

It is certainly noteworthy that the lawyer A.A. Levenstim, while analyzing the beggars' phenomenon in Russia at the end of the 19th century, points out an obvious advantage of the Jewish system of charities over the organization of help to the sick and the disabled among the Orthodox Christians. Moreover, the author is quite abrupt when claiming that "a near-complete absence of charities" in the Orthodox Christian segment was one of the reasons for the proliferation of beggars. That stands in stark contrast with how this social ill was fought by some other religious communities of the Empire (Levenstim 2004, pp. 20–21, 69). Although the research was carried out several decades later than the events under discussion, the comparison could be considered relevant if we consider the parallel growth in the number of beggars among the Russian population and in Jewish communities of post-reform Russia.

Obviously, Mariya, upon becoming a Jewess, could take advantage of a rather large-scale Jewish charity. Additionally, she received a chance to get married quite quickly.

It is well known that marriage in the Jewish tradition is considered a commandment given to all people, and celibacy is condemned (Telushkin 1994, pp. 131–43). In Jewish society, the possibility of finding a spouse was available to representatives of the lowest social strata, including the destitute. Provision of dowry to a needy bride was perceived by some rabbis as the highest manifestation of charity (Meir 2020, p. 101). As early as the Middle Ages and the early modern period, Jewish communities had fraternities to support impoverished orphans, to ensure the search for grooms for orphaned girls without dowries, and providing for their weddings (Meir 2020, p. 34). It is noteworthy that the phenomenon of the so-called "cholera wedding", a spousal union between two Jewish disabled destitute people performed with the goal of overcoming an epidemic (even though

this phenomenon emerged after the case being analyzed), indirectly reflects the idea of necessity and availability of marriage for all Jews, including those who presumably could not afford it. One of rabbinical works perceived arranging a “cholera wedding” as a sign of mercy (Meir 2020, p. 101).

For Mariya, a destitute vagrant, marrying into a Jewish community proved to be a fast and feasible option. She posed as an orphan, and, as it has been pointed out, taking care of orphans was an important religious prescription in Judaism. The community quickly found her a socially suitable partner, organized a wedding, and raised funds for a wedding gown and a meal; the newlyweds were also provided with temporary housing.

Along with that, Mariya’s expectations could have been built on the model of family life characteristic of her culture. That patriarchal model assigns responsibility for providing for a family to a man. According to S. Stampfer, most of the Jewish women in Eastern Europe worked in the 19th century. S. Stampfer suggests that the Jewish society of Eastern Europe apparently did not belong to the patriarchal type, and in some cases, we could talk about a matriarchate (Stampfer 2010, pp. 41–42, 90, 121, 140). Mariya’s expectations did not come true, and she ended up choosing the track of getting hired as a servant, something she had been used to. Now she could work without breaking the law prohibiting Christians from serving in Jewish homes.

Thus, being included in Jewish life proved to be attractive to a Christian girl belonging to a low social stratum. She was now entitled to stay in Jewish homes as a servant maid, get married, receive community assistance for her wedding ceremony, and stay in *hekdesh* while traveling and solicit alms as a Jewess (keep in mind that *hekdeshes* were available not just in cities, but in villages as well). Marriage and divorce from a Jew (such divorce was much easier than divorce among Orthodox Christians in the Russian Empire) provided her with the necessary documents. We need to bear in mind that Mariya was a serf by origin, and she was registered with her owner, Count Morkov. The new socialization was a way for her to acquire personal freedom.

Thus, the most attractive aspects of the new religion were related to social support practices and the very possibility of social integration. However, we cannot completely exclude a religious motive due to the lack of necessary information.

## 5. Conclusions

An analysis of the document leads to the following conclusions:

1. Abysmal poverty, very low social status, lack of established emotional ties in the Orthodox Christian community, and scarcity of “religious capital” set the stage for Mariya’s conversion;
2. Conversion to Judaism happened due to the girl’s long stay in the Jewish environment, where she developed meaningful social relations and learnt new religious and cultural practices;
3. The story of a peasant woman from Podolia is a specific re-socialization attempt through religious conversion and marrying a Jew. Social support practices, ways to legalize her new status, finding a job and personal freedom turned out to be the most attractive for Mariya.

Let us bear in mind that the economic conditions were dire for Russian Jews after the war in 1812. A combination of war calamities, numerous mandatory services, requisitions, and plundering, the early 19th century policies of forced resettlement from villages to towns and *shtetls* ruined the Jewish Pale economy. According to J. Klier, resettlements caused a true humanitarian disaster (Klier 1986, pp. 141, 148). A destitute Jewish girl begging for alms together with many of her fellow sufferers would not surprise anyone. However, even abject poverty enveloping the Jewish Pale population did not destroy social institutions ensuring some minimum charitable assistance;

4. The strict laws of the Russian Empire related to inter-confessional interaction could not completely exclude cases—albeit rare—of non-Jews’ individual acceptance of the Jewish religious and cultural traditions in the early 19th century.

Finally, I would like to make a short comparison. Historians studying the phenomenon of the Jews' conversion to Christianity in the Russian Empire point out that most conversions occurred for social and economic reasons. Destitute, desperate lonely people who had lost important family members accounted for a significant portion of the converts (Stanislawski 1987; Gerasimova 2013, pp. 56–69, 188–89). These motives were crucial in Mariya Guleva's behavior, mirroring Jewish conversions to Christianity. Paradoxically, however, the "rational choice" brought the character of the story to conversion from a dominating denomination to a religion of the minority, an attempt to integrate into a community whose rights in the Russia of that historical period were severely restricted.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Ger* (גר)—in Judaic tradition a gentile who converted to Judaism and joined a Jewish community.
- <sup>2</sup> The term "dukhovny", according to Olga Minkina, was widely applied to the Jews in the Russian clerical documents of the first half of the 19th century; depending on the context, it could signify any Jew carrying out any religious duties, for instance, a head or a member of *bet din*, a rabbi, etc. Possibly, in our case, it was a *dayan*, that is, religious judge.
- <sup>3</sup> Dynasteria means the Diocese Department of Religious Affairs.
- <sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs at that period handled cases of sectarians and old believers. Cases related to various faiths and denominations in 1817–1824 were examined by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and People's Education; from 1824, they were examined by the Main Department of Religious Affairs related to Foreign Denominations.

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