

Missionary Activity of *Mariae Vitae* Congregation

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Abstract

The *Mariae Vitae* Congregation was the first and possibly the most important missionary institution in Poland-Lithuania in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to the Rule of *Mariae Vitae* Congregation, it had to deal with religious and lay education of converted girls (mainly Jewish) and provide them with practical skills of work so they could establish in Catholic society. The innovatory social program of *Mariae Vitae* Congregation including education and financial help answered to possible problems of neophytes in Poland and Lithuania of that time.

Zusammenfassung

Die *Maria Vitae* Ordensgemeinschaft war die erste und vermutlich wichtigste Missionsinstitution im polnisch-litauischen Gebiet des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts. Gemäß ihrer Regeln war die *Mariae Vitae* Ordensgemeinschaft in der religiösen und Laienbildung von (vor allem jüdischen) konvertierten Mädchen tätig. Sie ließ ihnen praktische Arbeitsfähigkeiten angedeihen, damit sie sich in der katholischen Gesellschaft etablieren konnten. Das neuerungsträchtige Sozialprogramm der *Mariae Vitae* Ordensgemeinschaft, das finanzielle und Bildungshilfe miteinschloß, gab Antworten auf mögliche Probleme von für jüngst Konvertierte in Polen und Litauen dieser Zeit.

The aim of this article is to research the activity of the Congregation of *Mariae Vitae* amongst the Jews and its attempts to convert them to Catholicism in Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Russian empire. In order to achieve this goal we have to outline the main principles of their activity and to recreate the social programme for converts that was meant to help them to integrate into Catholic society, and how it was employed regarding the wider context of Jewish-Catholic relations: attracting potential converts, their education, baptism and granting of social guarantees. Both the sources and the historiography on the topic¹ discuss very briefly a conversion, the procedure itself, the mo-

1 Dzieje zgromadzenia *Mariae Vitae* czyli mariawitek (The activity of the *Mariae Vitae* Congregation or the Mariavites), *Nasza Przyszłość*, (Krakow, 2000), t. 93, pp. 107-152, however she mainly refers to two anonymous Mariavites' accounts (Górski K., O zakonie pp. Mariawitek (On the Mariavites Congregation), *Nasza Przyszłość*, (Krakow, 1959), t. 9, pp. 395-408; Krótka historia zgromadzenia sióstr *Mariae Vitae*, napisana przez jedną Mariawitkę (Short history of *Mariae Vi-*

tives of the catechumens to baptize and particular preparations for a baptism and a Christian way of life. Nevertheless, the fragmentary sources² used in the research provide us with a wider perspective of the Congregation and their work aimed at the converts. The authors of the literature discussing the activity of the Congregation often focus on the historical events and financial or juridical situation of the Congregation leaving out the research of deeper relations between Jews and Catholics and the status of the neophytes.

The foundation of the convent and the Rule

In the historiography the date of establishment of the *Mariae Vitae* Congregation is considered to be 1737³. However, the formation of the Congregation took almost another two decades. Pope Benedict XIV confirmed the Congregation only in 1752⁴. 1737 was the year when the idea of such an institution was born in the head of Stefan Józef Turczynowicz⁵. We know very few about the founder's decision to undertake the work of converting non-Christians, except a single not necessarily realistic account⁶ by an anonymous nun that was later retold through the historiography. The story tells us that a fisherman came to see Turczynowicz and asked to hear out his confession as he had a feeling that he was going to drown in three days. The priest did not believe him and told him to come back after the fishing to confess his sins. Unfortunately, the fisherman did drown and this event moved Turczynowicz deeply

tae sisters, written by a Mariavite), *Dzieje dobroczynności krajowej i zagranicznej*, Vilnius, 1820, January, pp. 17-37; sequel - Dodatek o historii siostr mariawitek (Addition to the history of the Mariavites sisters), *Dzieje dobroczynności*, 1820, August, pp. 391-392. The rest are short mentions of the Congregation and several laconic sent typically defining the activity of the Mariavites as the education of the catechumens and the care of orphans, they also describe the main events in the history of the Congregation such as the establishment and first and second close-downs.

- 2 1828 visitation of Vilnius convent of the Mariavites held in the Manuscript department of the Library of Vilnius University (VU RS), F 57, B 53, 1 and baptism files (VU RS F 57, B 54, 130, 134); 1830 visitation of Vilnius convent of the Mariavites, Lithuanian State Historical Archive (LVIA), the Fund of Roman Catholic Curia of Vilnius region F 694, Ap. 1, b. 949; the description of the convent's building and St. Stephen's church in Vilnius county archive (F 1019 B 5783); A file of a baptism of Jew Berkowicz' son, The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Hu 2/7919.6
- 3 The Congregation of *Mariae Vitae* was active 1737-1773 (the first closedown) and 1788 (the affirmation of bishop Ignacy Massalski) – 1864 m.
- 4 The same year the Congregation was also confirmed by bishop Michał Zienkiewicz.
- 5 Borowska M., *Dzieje zgromadzenia Mariae Vitae czyli mariawitek*, p. 112.
- 6 Górski K., *O zakonie pp. Mariawitek*, p. 396.

and pushed him towards dedicating himself to the missionary work. However, this account does not provide the information on what were the preconditions and spurs to establish a congregation that was unique not only in the Lithuanian or Polish but also in the European context and made its goal to convert Jews, Karaites and Tartars. The main source for recreating the social programme of the Mariavites will be their Rule⁷. The documents on the missionary work performed by the Mariavites⁸ or by Turczynowicz himself, suggest that the main target group were Jews. Even though a copy of the Rule of 1817 also mentions the baptism of Karaites and Muslims, the documents that survived to this day present the material almost exclusively about the converts and catechumens of the Jewish origin⁹. It is possible that sometimes the Jewish ethnicity or religion was assigned to the Karaites, but it is more likely that there were very few neophytes from amongst the Karaites or Tartars. The sisters¹⁰ of *Mariae Vitae* Congregation, the Mariavites, every year on the day of Virgin Mary renewed their profession of purity, poverty and obedience¹¹. The first sisters were accommodated by Turczynowicz next to St. Stephen's church in Vilnius where he himself was a parson, however the Mariavites acquired it to their jurisdiction only in 1821¹². From 1744 to 1821 it was a parish church and, later, a branch of the Church of All Saints. Afterwards, sixteen convents in Lithuania and its Belorussian lands were found: Mścisław, Minsk, Kaunas (Kowno), Słonim, Polock, Orsza, Krorzy, Hołowczyn, Witebsk, Grodno, Nowogródek, Wołkowysk, Mozyrz, Pińsk, Chołopienicze and Bobrujsk, and

7 Borowska M., *Reguła druga mariawitek* (The Second Rule of the Mariavites), *Nasza Przyszłość*, (Krakow, 2000), t. 94, pp. 333-347.

8 Górski K., *O zakonie pp. Mariawitek*, pp. 395-408; *Krótką historią zgromadzenia sióstr Mariae Vitae*, napisana przez jedną Mariawitkę, pp. 17-37; *List okolny fundatora sióstr Maryawitek s. p. X. Kanonika Tarczynowicza* (A letter of founder of Mariavits priest Tarczynowicz), *Dzieje dobroczynności*, (Vilnius, 1820), August, pp. 392-395.

9 A file of a baptism of Jew Berkowicz' son, Hu 2/7919.6, baptism files of Leika Asowna, Sara Szydelska, Sorka Zelikovna VU RS F 57, B 54, 130, Chaja Jochelowna VU RS F 57, B 54, 134; a baptism certificate, Manuscript department, Library of Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (MAB RS) F273, b. 3920, a letter of Rodkiewiczowna VU RS F 57, B 54, 134; a letter of Teresa Tomicka VU RS F 57, B 54, 130; a visitation of Vilnius convent of the Mariavites in 1828 m., VU RS, F 57, B 53, 1; a visitation of Vilnius convent of the Mariavites in 1830 m., LVIA F 694, Ap. 1, b. 949.

10 It is possible that Turczynowicz unsuccessfully tried to establish a similar monastery for male converts, Górski K., *O zakonie pp. Mariawitek*, p. 397.

11 Borowska M., *Reguła*, p. 338.

12 St. Stephan's church, VAA, F 1019 B 5783, p. 9.

one in Poland, in Częstochowa¹³. There were approximately 60 sisters and 400 neophytes¹⁴. Usually the convents were founded in the administrative centres of counties or voivodeships. When looking at the population census of 1790 we can notice a tendency to establish the convents in the places with a relatively high number of non Christians¹⁵.

The aim of the Congregation was the conversion of the non Christians (Jews, Karaites, Muslims (Tatars)) to Roman Catholicism and the care and education of the converts and orphans. This is clearly stated in the Rule that was written by Turczynowicz himself. It consists of seven chapters and each of them has from one to twelve articles. The Rule was probably written according the Rule of St. Augustine¹⁶, however the origin or the name of the saint are not directly mentioned and the text is often rephrased or supplemented by unique paragraphs that cannot be found in any other known rule¹⁷.

The Sixth chapter is unique and talks about the conversion of female non Christians to the Roman Catholic faith and provisional preparations to the next step. After a catechumen was baptized the sisters had to give her some work, as the Sixth chapter's sixth article put it:

They have to provide [the converts] with food and appropriate clean clothing according to the possibilities and needs, and keep them [in the convent] until they figure out and provided the source of the living for the neophytes¹⁸.

The social programme of the Mariavites was created with the prevention of an apostasy in mind. That was what made this Congregation exceptional in the context of the Church politics towards non Christians at the time. Most importantly, it was forbidden to let the catechumen out of the convent and it was obligatory to take care of them and find them an occupation in the Christian environment so they would not be tempted to return to their old milieu. The

13 Krótka historia zgromadzenia siostr *Mariae Vitae*, napisana przez jedną Mariawitkę, pp. 17-37.

The same list is found in Kamiński M., Kościół Św. Stefana i klasztor Maryawitek w Wilnie, *Tygodnik ilustrowany* (Illustrated weekly), (Krakow, 1863), No. 202, p. 311 (pp. 311-312). The years of foundation of every convent are not indicated.

14 Krótka historia zgromadzenia siostr *Mariae Vitae*, napisana przez jedną Mariawitkę, pp. 17-37.

15 There were 508 Tartars in Nowogródek (the biggest population in the county), 697 Jews (382 men, 315 women), 552 Jews (275 men, 277 women) in Wołkowysk, 590 Jews (290 men, 300 women) in Mozyrz, 2650 Jews (1608 men, 2042 women) in Pińsk. According to Jasas R., Truska L., Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės surašymas 1790 m. (Population census of Grand Duchy of Lithuania year 1790), Vilnius, 1972.

16 Borowska M., Reguła, p. 334.

17 Ibid., p. 334.

18 Ibid., p. 339.

Mariavites had a separate group of pupils that consisted of orphaned noble girls that were also welcome in the convent according to the Chapter Six. Unfortunately, these articles (VI, 8-11) of the Rule do not provide any additional information on their education or work.

When referring to the Rule it becomes possible to recreate the main field of work of the Mariavites: education - religious and lay. Education as an underlying activity is also reflected in the everyday schedule of the nuns. Nevertheless, work was equally as important and was mandatory to the nuns and their pupils, as the Rule quotes: "*qui non laborat, non manducet*". According to the schedule the girls could spend working and learning up to nine hours a day (if we include the time after supper that might have been substituted for some simple work¹⁹).

The social programme of the Mariavites

As early as in 1741 John Christopher Lewek, who called himself a convert²⁰, wrote a letter to Michał Antoni Radzwił²¹ where he complained about the lack of concern about converts, especially from the side of the lay authorities. According to Lewek, if it was desirable to attract more Jews to convert, it was essential to provide them with substantial financial assistance so they could have some money for "bread and living"²². The *Mariae Vitae* Congregation was established shortly and its social programme for neophytes mostly consisted of work and education (religious and lay). These elements were meant to guarantee a smooth integration of a neophyte into the new society. Other parts of the programme were dedicated to the prevention of the apostasy: institutionalized system of baptisms and creation of a new "social face" for a neophyte. We will discuss each of these elements separately and will try to evaluate how the social

19 Ibid., p. 341.

20 The authorship of a Catholic theologian who pretends to be a convert is also possible, Rok B., Stosunek polskiego Kościoła katolickiego do sprawy żydowskiej w 1. połowie XVIII wieku (The attitude of Catholic Church towards the Jewish population in Poland and Silesia), *Z historii ludności żydowskiej w Polsce i na Śląsku* (From the history of Jews of Poland and Silesia), (Wrocław, 1994), p. 91 (pp. 85-97).

21 Z literatury antyżydowskiej w Polsce XVIII wieku (Jan Krzysztof Lewek, List pewnego statysty, Wilno 1741) (From the Polish anti-Jewish literature of XVIII century (Jan Krzysztof Lewek, a letter of a certain placeman), *Z historii ludności żydowskiej w Polsce i na Śląsku* (From the history of Jews of Poland and Silesia), (Wrocław, 1994), pp. 213-226.

22 Ibid., p. 217.

programme helped to pursue the missionary work of the Mariavites and how unique and significant it was.

The Fortieth article of the Instruction for the inspector of the Mariavites of 1822 required that every convent had a public school designated to the girls coming there twice a week whose tuition fees were paid by their parents, or to the orphans and catechumens. The lists of 1828 and 1830 mention the teachers of German and French, even though the language subjects were not indicated in the Rule together with work and religion classes. It is not clear whether neophytes were taught these subjects in order to give them a higher education than the one they could have expected to get in the Jewish community and to make them more desirable to the potential Catholic husbands. V. Zahorski²³ mentions French language as a subject when he names the classes orphaned noble girls had:

The Mariavites – besides reading and writing – taught the orphaned noble girls the elements of arithmetic, history, geography, literature, French and drawing, they also taught: sewing, styling, embroidery and weaving²⁴.

Then he names the subjects of the neophytes: “cooking, washing, sewing, woman’s work and gardening”²⁵. If the author deliberately mentioned some of the subjects exclusively as a part of the noble girls’ time table, and others as a part of the education of the neophytes, the latter had a poorer schooling that was more like the one in the Jewish community, i.e. more utilitarian²⁶.

23 Władysław Zahorski (1858-1927) – historian, a member of Vilnius society of science lovers.

24 Zahorsky W., Kościół Św. Stefana i zgromadzenie mariawitek (St. Stephen’s church and the convent of the Mariavites), *Виленские костели* (Vilnius Churches), F 1135, Ap. 8, B.10.

25 Ibid.

26 Lithuanian Jewesses were poorly educated, their education was not a goal on its own like for boys: “If a girl can read a little bit, pray a little bit, then she is already a true “intellectual” (Zborowski M., Herzog E., *Life is with people*, (New York, 1995), p. 124). Boys were privileged to study Talmud and other Scriptures thoroughly, that is why it is not surprising that it was easier to attract girls towards “the real faith” as they were less into the theological subtleties, additionally they were even taught more about the faith in Christian environment than they could expect being taught in the Jewish one. The education of the Jewesses of the time in Lithuania differed significantly from the boys’: when the latter got “cultural education” (Stampfer S., Дифференциация по половому принципу и женское еврейское образование в восточной Европе в XIX веке (Gender Differentiation and Education of the Jewish Woman in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe), *Еврейское образование* (Jewish Education, Saint Petersburg, 2001), No. 2, p. 122, (pp. 118-130)) that embraced the studies of Torah and Talmud, girls were restricted to exceptionally “utilitarian studies” (Ibid., p. 122) like a little bit of writing and reading. Only daughters of the wealthy families could get a teacher and less wealthy went to *heder*. However, it is likely that the ones who ended up in convents of the Mariavites did not have

On the other hand the noble girls got an education appropriate for a noble girl, as it is written in the Rule: “giving proper education” (*przyzwoitą edukację dawać*²⁷). The sixth article of the Seventh Chapter of the Rule also provides some understanding about various types of education within the convents:

At one o'clock in the afternoon everyone has to work, learn; some should be taught the rules of the faith while others – reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing and other crafts...²⁸

As it is seen from the quote, some of the girls might have had one lesson while the others at the same time were doing something else. Nevertheless, it is not indicated which subject was designated to whom and whether all of the subjects were embraced during the day. It is likely that noble girls and the girls that paid for the education got higher quality and did not have to do any crafts or housework, whereas the neophytes were provided with the knowledge that would help them integrate into the new community, i.e. rules of faith and skills of some “women’s crafts”. Thus working skills and some education were the part of the social programme for the converts, something of a “survival kit” that she might need when entering the new Christian milieu and trying to adapt herself to the new conditions.

A fair number of the Jews converted²⁹ in Turczynowicz’s initiative or his “gentle persuasion, teaching and advice”³⁰ show not a merely superficial enthusiasm to increase the number of Christians in the country. The founder of the *Mariae Vitae* Congregation personally “fed, redressed, taught, converted and baptized the ones who wanted (sic)”³¹, and he mostly took notice of the poor. When Turczynowicz gathered the Mariavites he prepared a whole social programme for how to integrate the neophytes into the Christian society, which must have been hard work considering the mutual prejudices between Jews and Christians of the time³². The task must have been easier if a girl who

these opportunities so the education given them by the sisters might have been a real motivation to give themselves to the care of the Mariavites and get baptised.

27 Borowska M., Reguła, p. 339.

28 Ibid., p. 340.

29 *Dzieje dobroczynności*, 1820, August, p. 21, mentions 400 neophytes; *Dzieje dobroczynności*, 1820, January, p. 35, mentions 2000 neophytes.

30 Krótka historia zgromadzenia sióstr *Mariae Vitae*, napisana przez jedną Maryawitkę, p. 18.

31 Choinski – Jeske T., *Neofici Polscy* (Polish Neophytes), Varšuva, 1904, p. 20.

32 In seventeenth-eighteenth century Poland-Lithuania the intolerance towards the converts increased and is associated with general rise of intolerance, Teter M., Jewish conversions to Catholicism, p. 264-265.

wanted to convert to “the real” faith was an orphan, than if she had to leave her parents’ home, break off with her family and community, and be not only deprived of her religion but her nationality as well. It is obvious that a girl would have been left without anything and after a baptism it would have been unlikely for her to find a place without the help of the Mariavites. There was also an option to stay in a convent and become a nun. Keeping some girls within the convent must have been quite convenient for the Congregation itself as that meant a guarantee of continuing existence of the Congregation, maintenance of the number of sisters needed and what is more important – a sister neophyte who knew Yiddish and who had experienced conversion herself could have been a wonderful teacher and supervisor for the catechumens. Realizing this situation Turczynowicz ordered the sisters to teach the girls not only about the truths of the Christian religion, or how to read, write, do arithmetics, but also how to work, as he put in the Rule’s Chapter Five’s fifth article: “After the holy baptism [the Mariavites] have to teach various work (*„robót i pracy”*)³³ so they [the converts] could be useful to themselves and to the others.”³³ In the letter to the congregation³⁴ on the 2nd of January 1744 Turczynowicz wrote about the importance of helping the neophytes and he put it in a very convincing preacher’s tone that is reminiscent more of the apocalyptical feeling of Baroque than the waking era of Enlightenment. He depicts Jewesses as poor and stray, having abandoned or been abandoned by their families and as absolutely incapable of work. According to Turczynowicz, for the latter reason it was very difficult to get them a job in a Catholic home or find them a Catholic spouse. There is some uncertainty whether he exaggerated the pitiful state of girls of Jewish origin in this depiction in order to get the support he needed. It is possible that it was merely an echo of a stereotype of Jewish girls not being in a position to get a decent education. However, it is also likely that Turczynowicz and the Mariavites might have encountered problems with the converts not being accepted in the Christian society. The social programme of integrating the neophytes like the one created by Turczynowicz had never been employed in Lithuania or in the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian kingdom before, and local people must have received it not without suspicion, not to speak of the possibility of employing converted Jewesses in their own home or getting them married with their sons.

33 Borowska M. OSB, Reguła, p. 339.

34 List okolny fundatora siostr Maryawitek s. p. X. Kanonika Tarczynowicza, p. 392-395.

Turczynowicz illustrates a popular negative opinion about the Jewish converts with a saying: "a baptized Jew is like a hidden wolf"³⁵.

The Rule written by Turczynowicz instructed the Mariavites to take care of anyone who wanted to convert and to provide them with the necessary education. The sisters had to inform the authorities of the catechumen's desire to be baptized. The Rule also said that a catechumen had to be examined by the Church authorities in front of two or three witnesses³⁶, the Mariavites were preparing the girls precisely for this exam. V. Zahorsky also mentions the examination:

In order to escape the abuse that might originate from too much zeal, a neophyte had to give an exam in front of bishop, magistrate and sometimes even a delegate of the kehilla³⁷ before the baptism³⁸.

The Instruction for the inspector of the Mariavites added new references concerning the neophytes. A girl could not be admitted to convent without a written permission from the lay authorities (*świeckiego urzędu*). After a baptism a girl had to be clothed and supported, she also had to take on some work so she could take care of herself and others. It is not really clear what the procedure looked like before 1795, but after Vilnius was absorbed into the Russian empire police documents and the correspondence of the Church allows us to recreate the legal procedure of a baptism. At first, a person willing to get baptized had to be questioned by the police in order to be sure that his or her will to convert was unconstrained. Later a bishop or another Church representative³⁹ sent the candidate to a convent (a girl usually to the Mariavites). The sources mention two testimonies required for the Dean's office (*do urzędu Dziekana*): on the knowledge of the doctrine and good behaviour⁴⁰. It is not quite clear who the people who issued these testimonies were – either the monks or nuns themselves or other Church representatives who were involved in the conversion process⁴¹. The neophytes also received a onetime allowance⁴²

35 Ibid., p. 393.

36 Borowska M. OSB, Reguła, p. 339.

37 It remains unclear where from Zahorski gets this very highly unlikely fact.

38 Zahorsky W., Kościół Św. Stefana i zgromadzenie mariawitek..

39 Sometimes a catechumen was sent to the Mariavites by a visitor of monasteries of Vilnius bishopric in the name of the bishop of Vilnius.

40 In files of baptism of Chaja Jochelowna (after the baptism – Katarzyna Lipinska) VU RS F 57, B 54, 134, Leika Asowna VU RS F 57, B 54, 130, Sorka Zelikowna VU RS F 57, B 54, 130.

41 These two statements are required in Sara Szydelska's baptism file. In the case of Chaja Jochelowna these two statements are expected to arrive from a churchman who educated her.

(*jednorazowego pieniężnego wsparcia*⁴³). One of the previously mentioned anonymous Mariavites wrote that “at the moment”, i.e. 1820, there were 465 pupils in the seventeen convents and 13 of them were neophytes or catechumens⁴⁴. “Last year”, i.e. 1819, one neophyte was given to a “service” (*przyzwoitą służbę* – maybe becoming a nun?), another one had been given a promise to get married, two others were already married to “decent craftsmen”, another one to an officer. There was also one who was offered a dowry by an anonymous person and one who was getting it from one of the Mariavites⁴⁵. This information shows that the Mariavites were determined to help a convert to establish herself in the Christian society. A small amount of converts and catechumens in the convents was nevertheless a huge burden: the sisters had to take care of every convert’s fate individually, especially as we see a record of a sister herself providing a girl with a dowry.

When a girl came to the Mariavites her life must have changed tremendously. There were no traits of the old identity left, a girl was completely integrated (at least officially as the question of her relation with the new community and full participation in its life is a separate matter). The converted Jewesses were given new names and the old one ceased to exist⁴⁶. Moreover, a Jewess lost her father’s name and got a surname instead. It became impossible to identify a nationality or previous faith of a convert: a girl became a *tabula rasa*, in the lists of the converts one can only find Elżbieta Pocyanska, Zofia Wilalska, Magdalena Domicyanska, etc⁴⁷, with no reference to the girl’s origin.

42 The size of allowance is not indicated, but Zofia Rodkiewiczówna mentions it (*Letter of Zofia Rodkiewiczówna*, VU RS F 57, B 54, 134) and it is also required by a mother of a preteen Jewish girl and neophyte Teresa Tomicka (*Letter of Teresa Tomicka*, VU RS F 57, B 54, 130), even though they were baptised in the convent of the Visitation order. It is possible that this allowance had nothing to do exceptionally with the Mariavites, but was a common support for a convert.

43 VU RS F 57, B 54, 134, also *zapomoga* VU RS F 57, B 54, 130.

44 Krótka historia zgromadzenia sióstr Mariae Vitae, napisana przez jedną Mariawitkę, p. 35.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

46 A certificate of baptism granted to a Jewess Franciszka Murawska (MAB RS F273, b. 3920) issued on the sixth of February 1843 tells that she voluntarily came to get baptised. She was admitted to Slanim convent by the mother superior Waszkiewiczówna, baptised by a priest Hryniewicz and spend several years in the convent probably receiving the education she needed. Afterwards she came to Vilnius where at the moment of issuing a certificate she undertook “the service” („*zajmuje się obowiązkiem służebnym*”). It is not very clear what was this “service”, it is likely that it is monkhood had in mind. The fact that she is not married is testified by a Roża Gorska, who is also mentioned in the lists of the sisters of Vilnius convent. Certificate is issued by Zofia Rudkiewiczówna.

47 1830 visitation of Vilnius convent of the Mariavites LVIA F 694, Ap. 1, b. 949.

Vilnius Mariavites' convent's visitation document of 1828 and a list of people residing in the convent allow us to reconstruct some of the methods used when giving surnames to the converts. It seems that this process was conducted with no particular imagination. Most of the surnames are influenced by the Polish names of the months, probably according to the month when the baptism took place⁴⁸, for example: Marczewska (Marzec – March), Kwiecinska (Kwiecień – April), Lipiecka (Lipiec – July), Lutecka (Luty – February), Styczynska (Styczeń – Sausis). The surname Stefanowska is also common, as the church next to the convent was namely St. Stephens's (Stephan in Polish – Stefan). Even catechumens are already included in the lists with Christian names: Julianna Protanska, Elżbieta Semplinska, Aniela Woyciechowna, Tekla Henrycka. Once a girl entered the premises of a convent of the *Mariae Vitae* Congregation there was no Jewess left – a new person and a new identity was formed.

(Un)usual cases

The first closedown of the Congregation in 1773 showed that the activity of the Mariavites was not that well-run. The tensions between the Jewish and Christian communities, the unusual activities of the Mariavites amongst the non-Christians and possibly a less than neat procedure of baptism could have raised some doubts not only within the Church but within the Jewish community as well. The fact that Turczynowicz was accused of forcible baptisms just before his death indicates very tense relations between the Congregation and the Jews. The anonymous Mariavite calls these accusations void and slander of the enemies: "... none of the neophytes was ever forced to leave the non believing Jews"⁴⁹. However, her words are quite ambivalent when she talks about the Jews: they are lost and need to be taken back to "the real path", but at the same time they are enemies to be fought. When she writes about the first closedown she calls the situation: "the destruction of a weapon to fight them [Jews]"⁵⁰, and her regretful tone reminds us of the "stories and polemics that mourned the Jewish fallacy"⁵¹ and called to believe in "the miracle of conver-

48 For example: Chaja Jachelowna who was baptised on the eighth of July 1848 was renamed into Katarzyna Lipinska, VU RS F 57, B 54, 134.

49 Krótka historia zgromadzenia sióstr *Mariae Vitae*, napisana przez jedną mariawitkę, p. 22.

50 Ibid., p. 21.

51 Teter M., Jewish conversions to Catholicism, p. 257.

sion”⁵². Jews are stereotypically depicted as “very stubborn”⁵³ and “unwilling to prostrate themselves in front of the cross”⁵⁴.

The third article of the second chapter of the Rule says: “... male strangers cannot be let into the convent”⁵⁵. The fact that only a certain part of men are not allowed coming in, records an exception in the context of the convents⁵⁶. The article allowed men to help the nuns. If we take a look at the list of persons who lived and worked in the convent we will see that without exception all the servants were male and the nuns could not avoid interacting with them. The nuns, the catechumens, the converts and the male staff worked all together in the church and the convent. The male staff included: Antoni Bakanowski – an organist⁵⁷; Adam Przychocki – position not indicated, and three of his sons – Stephen, Jan and Tom. Other servants: Andrzej (?), Władysław Chit, Szymon Mackiewicz ir Michał Silicki. Their occupations are also unknown. This collaboration between females and males might be a reference to the attempt of Turczynowicz to convert men. There simply was no institution to take care of them. Possibly the priest sheltered them by the St. Stephen’s church and thus the encounter between the Mariavites and them was inevitable. Both the ones who serve in the church and the ones who work in the convent in the list of 1830 are entitled as “the ones who are in the convent” (*osób znajdujących się w klasztorze*).

There is a curious case of Antonina Minuwska. Right under her name in the list there are the names of two of her sons: Justin and Jan, and a daughter Jozefa. Antonina Minuwska is indicated as one of the orphan neophytes. Her case is interesting as she was probably received in the convent as an adult with three children. Nevertheless she is indicated as an orphan (*sieroty*) (was she an actual orphan or did it just mean that she had left her family, or maybe she was a widow and three of her children got into the list as orphans?) and was baptized with all of her children (their names are already Christian in the list).

52 Ibid., p. 257.

53 Choinski–Jeske T., p. 20.

54 Ibid., p. 20. However Choinski–Jeske in his book emphatically talks about boys, whereas girls according to him are “more favourable”.

55 Borowska M. OSB, Reguła druga mariawitek, Nasza Przeszłość, (Kraków, 2000), t. 94, p. 337.

56 Ibid., p. 337.

57 This organist is also mentioned in one of the letters of Zofia Rudkiewiczówna in 1845 (VU RS F 57, B 54, 134). It says that he not only works in the convent but also lives there. Thus it is likely that there were more male servants and workers who lived in the convent together with the nuns.

Thus, we do not know her nationality and it is difficult to tell more, nonetheless we cannot exclude the possibility that she might have left her husband or that he died and she turned to the Mariavites not only because of the religious concern but also because of the hardships of being alone. It is very likely that girls often turned to the sisters seeking material rather than spiritual help. Social guarantees and financial support, or even a job and marriage later, might have been quite a drive to baptize. What is more surprising is that the Congregation dedicated to work amongst female non-Christians also welcomed boys as in Minuwska's case. The names of the children are Christian so it is likely they were baptized and taken care of in the convent together with their mother.

Naturally, the Jewish community cannot have been delighted with the members who left. There were cases when after a baptism Jews came back to their native communities and families. The Mother superior of Vilnius Mariavites' convent Zofia Rudkiewiczówna wrote to Bishop Jan Ciwinski in 1845⁵⁸ about a case when a baptized Jewess did not wish to stay with Mariavites anymore and wanted to go back to her family in Ukmergė. Girls also managed to escape and run away before baptism⁵⁹. Relatives of the catechumens and neophytes also showed their discontent with the activity of the sisters. This might have been one of the reasons of the first closedown. Jewish attempts to retrieve the lost members of the community can be illustrated with several documents. One of them is a file of 1807⁶⁰ concerning a Jewish infant baptized in the Mariavites' church of St. Stephen. A Jew from Troki county, David Berkowicz, turned to the court and accused the Mariavites of baptising his son without his permission and asked to get the child back (he was kept in

58 *A letter of Zofia Rudkiewiczówna*, VU RS F 57, B 54, 134.

59 Rocha Mowszówna Krawcówna escaped a convent in Vilnius. She was sent to the convent not by the bishop but by a priest of St. John's church and visitor of Vilnius monasteries, so it is not quite clear how well she already knew about the faith and if she came there absolutely voluntarily. Sara Szydelska also ran away VU RS F 57, B 54, 130. The disappointment could have come because of the failed expectations when in the convent of the Mariavites. For example, we have a document with the neophyte's thoughts on her experience there: "what is good when instead of learning prays and other basics of religion I was tormented with work, i.e. I had to take care of the animals, to do laundry, to cook, to dig in a garden, and they will begin to prepare me only in one year". Thus, the aim of the Mariavites is no longer the care, but the survival. Lewalski K., p. 184. However, it seems that it was not a Mariavites' problem alone. There are records about men who fled the monasteries, very often with an inducement from other Jews or family. Baptism files of Leiba Renowicz (VU RS F 57, B 54, 135), Chaim Dawidowicz Ritt (VU RS F 57, B 54, 141).

60 A file of a baptism of Jew Berkowicz' son, Hu 2/7919.6.

Szaterniki hospital at the time). The misunderstanding originated from the permission that was given only on the behalf of a child's mother, China, who testified that she had wanted to be Catholic from an early age. With these seemingly exceptionally spiritual aspirations she decided to turn to the Mariavites taking her infant with her, hoping that they both would be eventually baptized. The baptism took place earlier than it was expected because of the child's illness so he would not die without being baptized. Both the Mariavites who testified in the court and the godparents claimed that the Jewess herself wanted to convert very much and did not mention the father even once. David Berkowicz's assertion that his child's baptism was invalid could not be acknowledged as according to Benedict XIV's bull (1747) a child had to be brought up as a Catholic no matter what the circumstances of the baptism and whether there was an agreement of both parents or not. The story of China herself is no less intriguing: she admitted in the trial that she left her husband and, advised by the scribe Josef Statkewicz, whom she wished to marry; she travelled to Vilnius to find a convent that would give her shelter and would prepare her for a baptism. When she was describing this period of her life she would not stop repeating that it was not the only reason to convert and that her wish to become Catholic was genuine. However, this becomes really hard to believe when she later said that Józef Statkewicz disappeared and her will to convert became weaker and she started to doubt. According to the procedure, China was questioned by the police and after the last questioning she did not come back as she found her parents, brothers and husband waiting for her and she stayed with them. In the end she wanted to retrieve her child who was by that time already a Catholic and has been raised separately from his Jewish parents. As we can see the genuine religious drive mentioned several times in the document was a much more calculated⁶¹ step than it might have seemed in the beginning. It is likely that cases such as this, when a Jewess who decided to get married with a Catholic turned to the Mariavites, even with a child on her hands, were not unique.

61 A witness from Vilnius Ana Bilova told that China wanted to get married with the scribe and he told her he had 50 000 zloty. A file of a baptism of Jew Berkowicz' son, Hu 2/7919.6.

Conclusions

It is not quite clear what was the procedure of a baptism before Lithuania was entirely taken over by Russian empire, however afterwards a person willing to baptism had to turn to the police and state his will, and after the readiness was confirmed (good behaviour and some knowledge about the Roman Catholic faith) she would be given to the Mariavites for the preparations. When taking care of a Catholic-to-be the Mariavites would provide her with some financial support (a place to stay in the convent, clothes and onetime allowance), necessary religious knowledge and would take care that she gets at least a minimal education that would help her to integrate into the Christian society.

It is unlikely that all the girls in the convents (neophytes, orphaned noble girls and city girls that paid for the tuition) were being taught according to the same programme as their goals must have differed very much: noble girls and city girls did not have a need to adapt themselves in the new environment, the education and possibly a place to stay was enough for them - whereas converts were left without their previous identity and had to learn how to be a part of the world that other girls belonged since they were born. In order to prevent apostasy the neophyte was provided with a new "social face", her interaction with the native community was limited and after she was educated a place to work or a marriage would have been arranged.

The Mariavites also welcomed Jewish women with their children even if they were boys, and it is likely they were baptized all together. It was not important if the permission to baptize a child was received only from one of the parents. *Post factum* a child had to remain Christian even if his parents changed their minds or one of them objected and could not have been given back to his Jewish parent(s). This rule was valid before Lithuania got into the Russian empire and after. Jews tried to oppose the system and to retrieve the lost members of the community, however these attempts could have been successful only if a neophyte was an adult and decided to come back himself or herself. Widowhood, potential marriage with a Catholic or financial troubles could have become a real motive to baptize and turn to the Mariavites who could have solved a significant part of financial and social problems of a Jewess.

Innovative and unique social programme of the Congregation, that embraced financial and social help and education, tried to solve the problems of converts of the eighteenth century. The Mariavites took their mission much

further than a mere financial aid – they offered the Jewesses a finished system that helped them to become and stay Christian. It created conditions that measured up to, or even surpassed, those offered by the Jewish community. Thus it became a more attractive motivation than sophisticated theological polemics for the baptism for poorly educated people.