Account of a Conversion from Judaism to Christianity (1775)

Abstract

While the baptism of Jewish individuals allowed for their integration into Christian society, it (nearly) always meant the exclusion from their native Jewish community. Friederica Paulusin took an exceptionally significant risk when she changed religions: she came from a wealthy family and had to leave the security of her parents' home in order to go through with her conversion.

Source

The Biography and Confession of Faith of Gütgen Steinhardin, a young Jewish woman known now, however, due to her baptism, which was performed by the grace of God and with the permission of the authorities on January 25, 1775, in the church of the Franciscans, as Friederica Maria Salome Agnes Margaretha Paulusin, largely written by the author herself and presented for Christian edification by her baptizer Deacon Laur. Herold. Nuremberg: printed and to find at Georg Friedrich Sir. [1775].

Life Circumstances.

The miraculous paths onto which the merciful God leads some souls who wander about in oblivion testify to His goodness and piety and to [the fact that] He provides for the true comfort of His reasoning creatures. I see this in the story of my own life thus far, which I share here [as best I can] according to my lacking abilities to think and write. I was born to Jewish parents in Binswangen near Dillingen [in Swabia] in 1752. My father, dead now for some twelve years, was named Juda Steinhard, and my mother, still alive, goes by the name Schönla. These beloved parents neglected nothing, doing all they could for the sake of raising me well. As wealthy individuals, they provided me not only with abundant food and clothes, but also for my mind to be educated well, as they saw fit. To this end, they had a "preceptor" [i.e., private tutor] come to teach me to read Hebrew at home. There was no instruction, however, in religion itself or the articles of the faith, for it is not customary among the Jews to teach girls about the religion. The reason for this callous treatment of the poor girls can be found in the Talmud, which says [that] if anyone teaches them something from the ???? or law, it is as though one were to teach them to be whores. For this reason, very few of them learn much about religion, and they have to content themselves with the fact that they can read Hebrew without understanding a single word.

When I was nine or ten years old, about the time I learned to read, my father died in 1762, which a source of great lamentation for me. Among the changes in our household which followed his death was that I no longer attended school and was [considered] sufficiently educated. My mother now undertook to teach me how to run a household. She was diligent in making sure that I observed the holy services for girls, which were composed of a number of ridiculous and absurd ceremonies. I was told the stupidest things about Christians and the promoters of the religion, so that I was forced to develop an aversion for this religion. And I certainly would not have come to this very faith if the Holy Spirit had not mercifully revealed the truth to me both directly and indirectly: if It had not shown me my blindness and [spiritual] poverty so clearly that I was forced to have a change of opinion. The more calmly I listened to the overtures of the Spirit, the more I thought that it could not be possible that God ever commanded any laws as absurd as those [being practiced around me]. I thought to myself, you are improperly worshiping and praying to God, for you are not allowed to attend school, except when Haman is slain[1] or the Jewish new year begins.

This was quite upsetting to my conscience, so that I often spoke with God, whom my heart knew: Dear God, how shall I become more blessed, when I worship you so poorly? I, too, have a soul which longs for heaven! Why did you not give the female gender laws about how they might honor you and become holy? Oh! It looks bad for our holiness, for our entire business is more animal than human. I was a martyr to these and similar thoughts and was quite uneasy due to my active conscience. Once in a while, I came into contact with Christians, who confronted me with all kinds of well-founded accusations. Among these, the one that touched me most was when they said that we Jews had been waiting for 1,700 years for the Messiah in futile, for he had in truth already come. They explained this to me in detail, so that I concluded it was probably right. And I resolved then in the name of the Lord to look for a reason to escape from my family in a well-mannered way and look for Christian individuals who would be willing to instruct me and prepare me for baptism. And my resolve in this matter grew, for I observed in any number of cases, how Christians encouraged children to attend church and participate in other spiritual practices from the age of six. I liked this very much.

Having gotten my hands upon a fictional invitation from friends in Fürth, which my dear one had to write for me, I went to my mother and implored her to allow me to visit my friends (the rabbi in Fürth) before the wedding and to invite them. I was finally granted this permission and, after a short visit with my sister in Kriegshaber, I boarded the postal coach bound for Nuremberg on the pretext of going to visit my friends. My two brothers came along for a short while, but finally had to leave me. Fortunately—and not without divine intervention—left alone by them, I prayed fervently (for I did not know to whom I should turn) that God might lead me along the best path. In the postal coach (and here, too, I praise the watchful eye of Providence) there were a number of Christian individuals to whom I could reveal my situation and my longing for the Christian religion. I had only just finished when an attractive person[2] expressed a desire to introduce me to Her Majesty, the Queen, but I, as a shy Jewish girl, humbly asked to forgo this favor. The more certain I became that I had found an advocate in this traveling companion, the more frankly I asked him for counsel. He advised me to proceed immediately with him to Nuremberg, where Christians who lived there would surely offer me a helping hand. Based on his advice, I traveled to Nuremberg and got off the coach in Gostenhof on April 26 of last year, where the most honest innkeeper, to whom I revealed my desire immediately, sent someone with me to see Deacon Herold at the Church of St. Lorenz.

After the Lord had opened a charitable house to me, where I was received most sympathetically, this deacon was moved by my distress and longing to acquire gracious permission for me to receive [religious] instruction. And the heavenly Father, who knows just what I need, touched other benevolent Christians on my behalf, who in turn provided me with food and drink and supported me with their advice and deeds so that I could justly proclaim: “I am unworthy of the mercy and devotion which you have shown to me!” And truly I could gratefully pray: Do good, O Lord, unto those with good and pious hearts! [Psalm 125, 4] Now that I no longer needed to worry about my physical needs, I began receiving instruction from my guide in the German language. I had just learned the letters and to read when the prayer which the Lord Messiah outlined to his followers was presented to me in catechism, for I was most of all eager to pray in the way the Messiah wanted. After this, I learned the small catechism and listened as he explained, bit by bit, from the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments. The verses [*Beweise*] that I was assigned to read and learn at home gave me such convictions that I felt perfectly at ease in my soul and conscience after only a few weeks. Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World who had come long ago, was painted so clearly for me to see that I had to recognize Him for the salvation of my soul; that I had to love Him, who had loved me even before I knew Him; that I swore to remain loyal to Him until death. Blessed be the moment when divine conviction made me able to say: I have found the Messiah, who was prophesied and foreshadowed for nearly 4,000 years! The Son of God! The King of Israel, who in the fullness of time became flesh, who came into this world with no other intention than to redeem the sinners through his actions, suffering, and death. How good for me,

given this knowledge, that I, too, can say: I am a believing sinner in search of salvation! How good for me, that I know the Messiah wants, by the power of his own merit, to save and bless me in the healing bath [i.e. baptism]. I looked forward to this, but my guide told me that he did not want to baptize me so hastily, but rather to wait for my knowledge to become broader and more vital. Shocked by his answer, I reminded him of the uncertainty of death [which can strike at any time], but was unable to procure baptism thereby, but rather only this answer: Should the Lord afflict you with a fatal illness, I am prepared and obligated to baptize you at once, but if this does not happen, I want to wait until you know everything which a baptized Christian, who should live in accordance with her baptismal covenant, must know. I was content with this answer, commending my life's journey to the Lord and trusting in Him. From this point on I studied for myself the catechism and its exegesis, heard a more thorough explanation of the order of salvation, and practiced daily reading and reflecting on Holy Scripture. Praise be to God, He who brought me via miraculous paths from the darkness of Judaism to the shining light of the Gospel! He who, by no merit of my own, but only by His own compassion, makes a child of wrath into a child of mercy and an heir to eternal life! Should I not call these riches (!) "riches of goodness and grace"? O God, Father, maintain me in your mercy, for without it I am a dead and damnable creature.

Heal and strengthen my character, O Jesus of Nazareth, the true Messiah, so that I might by the grace of God remain steadfast in the truth of Your divinity forevermore. And you, O Holy Spirit, sanctify me through and through so that I may forever live a holy life and thereby exalt my Savior on earth and carry my faith until the end, and at my judgment may joyfully behold the coming Messiah, whom those, my ancestors, stabbed to death! Yes, provide that I may forever say, together with Jesus's own people:

The Lord is our judge.
The Lord is our master.
The Lord is our king.
He helps us. ???

[…]

Now, here goes, Gütigen Steinhardin, as I call you for the final time, for you should henceforth, as testimony to and commemoration of the holy baptism which you are now to receive, bear the beautiful names of those dear women obediently asked to stand as baptismal sponsors:

Friederica, Elisabetha, Maria, Salome, Agnes, Margaretha!

And as an instructional reminder of this day, named after St. Paul's Conversion, you shall be called Paulusin! –

Come here now,

Friederica Elisabetha Maria Salome Agnes Margaretha Paulusin,

in the name of the triune God! –

And after this, the baptismal ceremony was carried out according to paragraphs 62 to 71 of the agenda, with lines 1 and 2 adapted as necessary.

Song: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, sc. verses 1 and 7.

Prayer.

NOTES

[1] The Jewish feast of Purim celebrates the saving of the Jewish people by Esther, the wife of the Persian king and a Jew herself. Esther foiled the plot and, as a result, Haman was executed. So this reference to going to "school" can be read to mean that the author had no access to religious instruction except for these high Jewish holidays of Purim and Rosh Hashanah—trans.

[2] Here the author uses the gender-neutral term *Person* with a feminine pronoun (*Person* is grammatically feminine in German), but in the next sentence she uses masculine nouns and pronouns—trans.

Source: *Gütgen Steinhardin einer jungen Jüdischen Tochter nun aber, nach der, durch Gottes Gnade! mit Oberherrl. Erlaubnis den 25 Januar 1775. in der Kirche zu den Barfüßern erlangten heiligen Taufe Friederica, Elisabetha, Maria, Salome, Agnes, Margaretha Paulusin, gröstentheils selbst gefertigte Lebens-Geschichte und Glaubens-Bekenntnis zu christlicher Erbauung, vorgelegt von dem Taufer Diac. Laur. Herold.* Nuremberg: printed and to find at Georg Friedrich Sir. [1775], p. 3–11, and p. 40). Available online at: https://www.digi-hub.de/viewer/image/BV044261932/1/LOG_0000/

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