

AGNIESZKA JAGODZIŃSKA

„Duszozbawcy”?

*Misje i literatura Londyńskiego Towarzystwa
Krzewienia Chrześcijaństwa wśród Żydów
w latach 1809–1939*



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MISSIONS AND LITERATURE OF THE LONDON SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIANITY AMONGST THE JEWS, 1809–1939

Summary

The London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews (LSPCJ) was the oldest and the largest British Protestant organization that carried out missions to the Jews. It was established in 1809 in London but soon moved beyond the borders of the city and the country, reaching Jewish communities on three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. The ‘English missionaries’ came also to the Kingdom of Poland, where in the early 1820s they opened their first missionary station in this territory. Poland, with its large Jewish population, was a natural destination for the LSPCJ. The missionaries visited Jewish towns and neighbourhoods, in which they distributed Bibles and missionary writings, and sought to engage Jews in religious disputes. They carried out this activity in the Kingdom of Poland until 1855, when for political reasons their agents were obliged to leave the country. The Society received permission to re-establish its mission here only in 1875, after a twenty-year interval. The missionaries operated in Poland until the outbreak of the Second World War.

The purpose of this study is not only to reconstruct the history of the LSPCJ’s missions (with a special focus on the Polish case) but also to analyse the most vital element of this endeavour, namely missionary literature. This literature encompasses various genres: periodicals, reports, pamphlets and tracts, (auto) biographies, and other types of missionary writings. As I claim here, the distribution of these writings among various reading publics was one of the most important strategies that the Society used in order to achieve its purpose. The questions which the book asks are the following: Who were the addressees of the various genres of missionary publication? What were the functions of this

literature? How effective was it in implementing the goals set by the Society? The aim is also to define how the missionary sources can be used for studying Jewish history, culture, and religion, and what methodologies can be applied in order to analyse them. The sources from the missionary archives are compared with Jewish and Polish ones, which enables me to present the narrative from various angles. An important part of my argument is based also on the analysis of the visual missionary culture, which includes woodcut prints, drawings, postcards, photographs, and other images. I use all these sources to reconstruct the Christian missionary stereotype of the Jews and Judaism and to define what purpose it served. I also demonstrate why the case of the LSPCJ's missions, relatively marginal to the general narrative of Jewish history, can be important for understanding the shifting boundaries of Jewish identity in the modern era.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the history of the London Society. In order to understand how and why the Society was created and what its goals were, I present the social and religious context which defined its beginnings. I discuss how trends such as the Evangelical Awakening, millennialism, restorationism, and imperial providentialism influenced the development of the English charity and missionary network in general and of the missions to the Jews in particular. I introduce two figures whose actions were crucial in the early stage of the Society: Joseph Frey, a Jewish convert, considered a founding father of the LSPCJ, and Lewis Way, its patron and great benefactor. Apart from presenting the general development of the missions to the Jews and the missionary strategies used by the London Society, I discuss in detail the history of the missions in Poland, explaining why the Polish case was so significant for the plans to convert Jews. This chapter also raises questions about the missionaries of the Society who were sent to work among the Jews. I compare several editions of the instructions which the LSPCJ created for its agents, arguing that amendments in successive editions were a direct reaction to specific problems encountered or created by the missionaries. This prescriptive portrait of an ideal missionary is further compared with the experience of the real missionaries operating among the Polish Jews. As I demonstrate here, in the first half of the nineteenth century many of the 'English missionaries' employed in the Kingdom of Poland by this Anglican organization were in fact German Lutherans or Calvinists. Special attention is given in my study to the status and role of women in the missionary enterprise of the London Society. As I argue, although women played many important roles in it, their employment as independent missionaries to the Jews took place much later than in other British missions carried out among 'the heathens'. I explain the reasons for this situation. In the conclusion, I try to assess the results of 130 years of activity

by the LSPCJ's missions. Although I analyse the statistical data, I suggest also to look beyond it and consider not only the religious but also the cultural and social impact which the missions had on the Jewish communities. I show how the case of the missions and converts of the London Society challenges the traditional boundaries of Jewish identity.

The second chapter discusses the missionary press published by the LSPCJ. The Society issued several titles addressed to various sectors of (mainly Christian) readers. The periodicals – published monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, or yearly – were a vital tool not only for the dissemination of religious propaganda but also for the fundraising system of the Society. The main functions of these periodicals were to promote the idea of 'the evangelization of the Jews', to inform readers about the progress of the missions, and to secure both the financial and the spiritual support of these readers. This chapter presents an analysis of some selected titles which were either typical or atypical of the publications of the Society. I discuss the most important magazines which published missionary intelligence from various countries, presenting information not only about missions but also about the Jewish communities living there. Special attention is given to a periodical addressed to female readers, which helps us to reconstruct further the role played by women in this missionary enterprise. Another interesting case is a magazine for children, which was expected to facilitate raising the next generation of the mission's supporters and to secure the continuity of the missionary work. This chapter also aims to analyse the image of Jews and Judaism created by the missionary press, which is specially vivid in the poetry published on its pages. I study the textual image together with the visual representations of the Jews which appeared in the periodicals, especially in the children's magazine. In order to understand how the stereotype of the Jews was constructed, I relate it to the autostereotype of the Christians who created it. As I try to demonstrate in the conclusion, the Jews in the missionary press of the London Society were a combination of the real and the imagined: stereotypical images constructed for the missionary purpose were presented to the readers together with the first-hand information about the life of Jewish communities gathered by the missionaries working in the field.

In the third chapter I discuss the missionary reports and their role in the functioning of the Society. This chapter consists of two parts. In the first part, I analyse why the Society ordered its missionaries to write regular reports and what instructions they received concerning this obligation. I am also interested in how the reports were created, how many authors they had, and how they were edited and censored. To reconstruct this process, I use the reports written by the missionaries working in the Kingdom of Poland in the first half of the

nineteenth century. My choice is motivated by the unique source material which has been preserved in this case: I compare handwritten missionary reports found in the Polish archives with what was later published in the missionary press in England. I demonstrate that, although the missionaries tended to avoid certain topics (such as politics) in the reports, they did not – contrary to popular claim – hide their failures. Defining why, how, and by whom these texts were created, helps us to understand their character and to determine their pros and cons as historical sources. In the second part of the chapter, I address the question of using the missionary reports as source material for Jewish studies. I demonstrate that, in common with the early modern polemical ethnographies written by Christians about Jews and Judaism¹, the modern missionary reports combine reliable historical or ethnographical accounts with religious bias and polemics. I present here the main methodological challenges faced by scholars who study this material. I analyse the language of the reports, pointing out how it can be simultaneously a hindrance to and meta-information for the scholar. Finally, to demonstrate practically the pros and cons of the missionary sources for studying the history of the Polish Jews, I offer an analysis of the missionary reports on the case of hasidism.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the missionary tracts which were distributed among the Jews in order to persuade them to turn to Christianity. As I argue, the term ‘missionary tract’ characterizes the function in which a given text was used rather than the genre *sensu proprio*. In fact, publications distributed as ‘missionary tracts’ represent various literary genres: sermons, addresses, religious polemics, dialogues, short stories, and others. Many of these texts are a religious and cultural paradox, and a close reading reveals their hybrid nature of being ‘the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau’². The popular strategy in this kind of literature was to disguise the evident Christian message under the cover of a Jewish form. This was done by the use of Jewish languages, Jewish cultural code, or Jewish protagonists. In this chapter, I analyse also the most famous nineteenth-century missionary tract, *The Old Paths* by Alexander McCaul³, which combines the desire to evangelize with severe anti-talmudic polemics. The Society published also numerous conversion narratives which,

¹ See Yaacov Deutsch, *Judaism in Christian Eyes. Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Avi Aronsky, Oxford–New York 2012.

² Aya Elyada, *A Goy Who Speaks Yiddish. Christians and the Jewish Language in Early Modern Germany*, Stanford 2012, p. 37 and also Gen. 27:22.

³ Alexander McCaul, *The Old Paths, or, A Comparison of the Principles and Doctrines of Modern Judaism with the Religion of Moses and the Prophets*, London 1836.

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although addressed also to the Jews and used as missionary tracts, were mostly written for and read by Christians. I discuss here also the results of the survey on missionary literature which the Society organized among its missionaries and co-workers in 1892. The responses to the questionnaire which they sent back to the headquarters in London offer an interesting assessment of the utility of the missionary tracts distributed by the Society. Finally, I analyse here the reactions of the Jews to the missions and missionary literature, and the measures taken by Jews to oppose them. Using the Jewish press and other sources, I also attempt to reconstruct the Jewish stereotype of the missionaries.

In conclusion, I address the difference between the missions of the London Society and other earlier Protestant missions to the Jews. I claim that, although the topics of the religious disputes held between the missionaries and the Jews were not much different from those of the previous centuries, the character and the organization of the LSPCJ's mission were completely modern. The Society functioned by means of the achievements of the modern age: new means of transport and communication, mass media, modern printing techniques. All this, together with the efficient system of fundraising and the support of the establishment, gave the missions to the Jews an unprecedented impetus. The London Society used also innovative missionary strategies, such as medical missions and social care initiatives. In addition, the literary output of the LSPCJ cannot be matched by any previous project for converting Jews. There had been no other organization which distributed among them similar numbers of Bibles and missionary tracts. No other organization published so many first-hand reports from the Jewish missionary field, contributing to the dissemination of knowledge about the Jewish communities in various corners of the world. In this closing chapter of my book, I summarize my findings and also present various assessments of the LSPCJ's missions, explaining what consequences they had for the historiography of this subject.

The book is supplemented by 82 illustrations, ten tables and charts, and an addendum containing nine missionary reports.

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