

# AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH RABINOWITZ

Kischineff, November 27, 1886



*“So span-long hast Thou made my day, my life as nothing before Thee” Psalm 39:6*

The day of my birth was the holy Sabbath, 23d (11th) September, 1837. My birthplace was Resina, on the Dniester, a small town in Bessarabia, where I spent the first ten years of my life. My father was David, son of Ephraim, son of Rabbi Wolf, of Orgeieff, in Bessarabia. Through them I am descended from Rabbi Israel, a learned commentator on the Talmud, who traced his descent from the primitive Gaonim. My mother’s name was Esther Sarah. She was a daughter of Nathan Neta, whose father was a disciple of the celebrated Zaddik Rabbi Jacob Simson of Schofatuvke.

I owe my early training to my maternal grandfather, Nathan Neta, of Resina, with whom my father then living at the village of Maschkowicz, near Orgeieff, placed me for education in my early childhood after my mother’s death.

Nathan Neta was an excellent man, learned in the Law, and a strict adherent of the Bescht, (a form of Hebrew Chasidism) and its devout practices. He endeavored from the first to instill in my young mind his own love for Torah, Talmud and religious books. He hardly left me out of his sight night or day (we shared the same bed), and took me with him three times every year when he went on pilgrimage to the learned Rabbi Salmina, of Raschkoff, son of Joseph, and the learned assembly of Chasidim (devout students) who met at his house. There he was proud to exhibit my early knowledge of Hebrew and the Holy Scriptures. I well remember how in my eighth year I repeated the whole Tractate Succoth, Mishna for Mishna, before the assembly at the Feast of Tabernacles, and how Zaddik warned my grandfather not to let me become too precocious. He was indeed, unwearied in all the details of my education, interspersing his instructions with numerous anecdotes of miraculous occurrences, and of the fates and sayings of learned men. I had to learn and repeat every day some chapters out of one or another of the twenty-four books of our Bible. I also had to commit to memory Rashi’s *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, and other books.

At six years old I could repeat the whole Song of Songs, and still remember how deeply even in childhood I was moved by Rashi’s words in the Prologue to his *Exposition*, on how Solomon, filled with the Holy Ghost, prophesied in that book of Israel’s repeated captivities, then still in the future, how they would bewail their former glory, and remember the loving kindness once vouchsafed them by God above all the peoples of the earth, and would learn to say, “I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better with me than now.”

In 1848 I was already in the second decade of my life, when, my grandfather being too old and feeble to continue the conduct of my education, my good father took me from Resina, and placed me under the care of my widowed grandmother, Rebecca, who, as daughter and daughter-in-law of Rabbins, was commonly called the Rabbinerin (Rabbiness). Under her roof I studied the Talmud night and day for the next five years under very learned teachers, whom my excellent father paid most handsomely, quoting on that behalf an utterance of the Talmud that a man's requirements for the duties of life are all predetermined for him, but not the amount that he shall spend on enabling his children to study the Law, for which, too special rewards will be vouchsafed for him.

My chief teacher at that time was Rabbi Joseph, son of Akiba, who belonged to the Chasidic circle of the celebrated Zaddik R. Raphael, of Berschid. With him I read many difficult passages of the Gemara, the Sohar, and other books of the deepest Hebrew Mysticism, and among them the writings of the great Rabbi Pinchas, author of the Chasidic Masaim, founded on Psalm 34:14, and Exodus 23:7, "When a lie shall be abhorred as no less a sin than a breach of the Seventh Commandment then will manifest Himself Messiah the Son of David in His glory."

R. Pinchas labored diligently at that time with his disciple, R. Raphael to implant the mystic doctrines of the Chasidic school, and teach its devout observances among their youthful hearers at Orgeieff. All our striving then was through union with the Holy One and His Shekhina, and to implore the gift of His Spirit from the Holy One, who, as Sohar says, walks at that hour with blessed souls in the Garden of Eden.

My mind at that time was entirely absorbed in Chasidic devotions, in meditations on the Eternal, and I took no pleasure in the amusements and occupations of my youthful companions.

I happened in my sixteenth year, on the Fast of the 17th Tammuz, 1853, that I was chastising myself at night-time, in penitential remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem, which was followed by the Fall of the Second Temple, when a messenger of glad tidings appeared with the announcement of my espousals to Golde, daughter of Daniel, son of Elia, which had just taken place in the customary manner, with the breaking of costly vessels, in remembrance of the sack of the Holy City; and were to be followed at latest in three years' time by our marriage. The whole transaction had been accomplished for us by the fathers on either side, and I had but to bow and smile acquiescence to the congratulations which poured in upon me.

In those days the fire of Chasidic piety glowed on the altar of my heart, but a flood of other influences now came from Central Europe, which tended rapidly to quench its fervor. An imperial ukase compelled all children of Hebrews to learn to speak and the write Russian language, and all teachers to read Moses Mendelsohn's translation of the *Pentatuech* with their pupils. A new spirit began to stir within me, and new ideas as to the real meaning of the Law and the Prophets served to infuse doubts in my mind as to the absolute sacro-sanctity of my Chasidic instructors, and the truth of their transcendental interpretations of the Scripture.

I began to read the modern Hebrew literature of the day, and gladly embraced new and more rational ideas and interpretations, more coming soon under the influence of which the over-wrought fancies of former teachers began to fade in my mind like a dream when one awakeneth. I was greatly helped toward this change by the acquaintance and intercourse with a young man named Jechiel Zebi, son of Meir Herschensohn, who at that time had a high reputation for Talmudic learning in Orgeieff. This new friend soon began to open my eyes as to the real nature of Kabbala and Sohar, and to show me that these were but a blinding veil for the minds of their Hebrew readers hiding from them the truth and the right interpretation of the Holy Scripture. He imparted to me some of the conclusions, which he had drawn from a scientific and historical study of the Law and the Prophets. I attached myself daily closer to this new friend, and we sat many hours together pursuing this, to me new course of study.

One day, after a visit to Kischineff, he brought back with him a little book which he said had been given to him by a Christian Pastor as one which would show him what Jesus of Nazareth really taught. It was in fact a Hebrew New Testament printed in London. "Perhaps," added Herschensohn, "this was really the Messiah whom Moses and the Prophets foretold." He gave me the book which I have by me still.

Other circumstances besides my intercourse with Herschensohn (whom my Chasidic teachers regarded as an "Epicurean" or Rationalist), led to a breach between me and my old way of thinking, and former teachers such as R. Joseph of Berschid, which compelled me to think of leaving Orgeieff. I retired to my father's house in the village of Maschcowicz, where he carried on his business. There I almost zealously pursued the study of a fresh set of old Jewish writers, of Maimonides, Albo, Gaon, which I had commenced in Orgeieff. I frankly proclaimed my new convictions the whole Chasidic system of mystic Theology rested on self-deception, and was irreconcilable with sound reason. My father by no means discouraged me in pursuing this new mental development, and gave me every assistance that I needed.

The time at length arrived for my marriage with Golde, who was now (1856) seventeen years of age, and is still my faithful and beloved wife. We were united in holy matrimony on the 7th Tebeth, and I continued for eighteen months to reside with my father-in-law, Daniel Goldenberg, at Orgeieff, and renewed my intimate intercourse with Herschensohn. I had hardly any other intimate friends there, though I daily attended prayers at the Beth-ha-Midrash. After residing a year-and-a-half at my father-in-law's house, I hired one for myself in Orgeieff, and opened a small shop with the help of my wife's marriage portion of 800 silver roubles.

In 1859 our dawning prosperity was suddenly ruined by a fire which destroyed sixty-six houses in Orgeieff, and deprived me and my wife, with our infant son, of all our little property.

The next decade was a time of much bitter suffering and anxiety. Yet did my great losses and my consequent poverty exercise a wholesome influence on my mind, driving me to fresh studies and occupations. I had some acquaintance with law which I carefully improved, and soon became legal advisor to my countrymen, far and near. My advice and my advocacy were invoked on all sides, and God granted

me good success. I became also a contributor to various Jewish newspapers, and well-known as a promoter of education and enlightenment among my people. Zederbaum, the founder of Jewish journalism in those parts, welcomed my co-operation. I established a school in Orgeieff for instruction in Talmud, Torah, and the Hebrew and Russian languages. The school did a good work and my endeavors on behalf of education were observed with favor in the highest government circles of Kischineff and Odessa. I became a member of the Society for Promoting Enlightenment among Jews in Russia. Wealthy families in Kischineff and the neighborhood gave me employment, and a new era of prosperity began for me in 1866 with the formation of a large business in Orgeieff, for the sale of tea and sugar in the town and neighborhood, which I conducted with success. Moreover in 1869 I was elected to a post in the Landrath of the district of Orgeieff, such as no Israelite had up to that time filled. So ended my third decade.

Anyone acquainted with the difficulties which beset the Israelite in Russia will understand my earnest desire, and endeavors for the advancement of my people which I then thought could be accomplished by education and enlightenment only. The spirit of the new time would soon, I trusted, set them free. The emancipation of so many thousands of serfs in Russia by the high-minded generosity of Emperor Alexander II, and emancipation of the negro slaves in the United States of America, which was effected by the great war between North and South, diffused a breeze of freedom and deliverance which I sucked in with avidity on my people's behalf, and awakened in me hopes that the nations of Europe would soon begin to see that their Jewish brother also is a man, and remember that the earth is given to the children of men.

But now came great disappointment of my hopes based on the liberating power of mere intellectual enlightenment. The crushing blow inflicted upon France in 1870-71, showed me how little the highest advances in civilization may avail a great people in the day of adversity, and that such alone would not save Israel.

Then again, the horrible persecution that broke out in Odessa greatly troubled me. I then found that education and enlightenment so far from shielding Jews from the rage of their enemies, made them and their nationality all the more odious to their Christian neighbors. The Jews of Odessa were the first to change costume, language, and proper names in order to be more like their neighbors, who in turn were the first to overwhelm with scorn and reproach, and to threaten them with destruction. In the third place, my work and official position as a member of the Landrath, taught me how little there was of sincerity behind the apparent friendship in which many Jews and Christians stood to one another.

I lost all spirit to continue my work at Orgeieff, sold my large business there, settled all my accounts, and moved to Kischineff on 9th November, 1871, with my wife and children, four daughters and one son, who was already attending the gymnasium at Kischineff. I hired a flat in a good house in the midst of my own people and the center of town, and intended to carry on a business in tea and sugar and other articles to be supplied from Odessa. But I heard an inner voice saying to me: "Leave trade and traffic; it will bring thee no blessing. Be an advisor and an advocate of thy oppressed people, and I will be with thee!" I obeyed what I felt was a divine call. I had a large circle of friends and acquaintance who gladly availed themselves of my legal knowledge and experience in various difficulties

with the government and in the Courts of Justice, and were ready and willing to pay for my assistance. I bought a piece of land in a quiet part of the town on which I built a comfortable house, and moved my family into it in 1873, less by my youngest little daughter (Tikwa), who fell victim to the cholera when it raged in Kischineff in 1872.

I soon became a much sought and much visited personality. Many in sore need implored my help. Many widows and orphans told me among floods of tears, sad stories of oppression, and in too many cases I discovered that the oppressor himself was a son of Abraham. Moreover, persons of wealth and position confided to me their private affairs, or consulted me on matters of municipal policy, in which I was ready to help them with no other payment than their grateful thanks. In this period I studied the Holy Scripture at home, and also gave lessons in Hebrew and Russian. Our Jewish public worship I attended on Sabbath and Holy days only, and was always ready to give up the leisure hours of the Sabbath-day to the exception of inquiring friends who came with theological and scientific interest.

In those days it was ordered by Providence that the learned journalist, Alexander Zederbaum removed from Kischineff to St. Petersburg, in order to publish his journal, *The Interpreter* (Ha-Melitz), in Hebrew and Russian, in the centre of Russian life and activity. He gladly invoked my assistance as a native of Kischineff in his new sphere, to act as a reporter and correspondent, and as an earnest of Jewish liberties and the amelioration of our people's condition. He urged that now himself in a position to gather information and exercise influence at headquarters, the time was come for us both to make a combined effort to raise our people's moral and social position, and that I should set myself to write a series of papers and essays with this object in view, which might appear regularly in his journal at St. Petersburg.

I felt that this close appeal to my conscience must not be neglected, and was more zealous than ever in calling public attention to the low moral and intellectual condition of my compatriots in Bessarabia, and to their special needs. My efforts in this direction were not without effect.

About this time, the cruel war broke out between Servia and Bulgaria on the one hand and Turkey on the other. The Emperor Alexander II resolved to assist the two Slavonic States in their efforts to gain their national freedom by sending Russian troops across the Danube, and Kischineff was the headquarters for this army in the south.

My own zeal on my people's behalf was naturally awakened, and hope renewed that the end of two millenniums of oppression might be approaching, but no help was forthcoming for Israel. When I heard how the notables of the Bulgarian people assembled themselves in the ancient Cathedral of Tirnova to thank the God of Heaven for deliverance from a tyranny of five hundred years, tears flowed from my eyes, and I exclaimed, "O Lord God of Israel, when shall it be by Thy gracious will to raise the horn of Thy chosen people? When wilt Thou take to Thyself Thy power and reign over Thy long forsaken and shame covered Zion?"

In 1878, I wrote a well-known pamphlet, entitled *Sabri maranan werabbanan—What think ye, our Lords and Rabbins?* which appeared in the

Hebrew journal *Morning Light (Haboke Or)*, and endeavored to show how the Rabbinate itself (i.e. the body of Jewish clergy) might be reformed and lifted up out of its present impotent condition as the first necessary antecedent of any real improvement in the state of the Jewish people, now lost in the mazes of poverty, ignorance, indolence, and unbelief, which must make the existence of true religion among them impossible. Many nights did I sit in consultation with the learned Dr. Levinton, anxiously inquiring how our people might be engaged of their own free will in agricultural pursuits, as the most useful and profitable of occupations, and so be raised out of their present miserable condition of hopeless, crushing poverty. With the consent of Government in Kischineff, we called a large meeting of our principal citizens, and endeavored to establish a society for the assistance of poor people undertaking garden work, and I addressed the Jews generally in their own dialect, for the furtherance of the same cause, setting them a practical example in my own person and those of my two sons, David and Nathan, who worked with me daily in our own garden plot.

With a like end in view for Russian Jews generally, I wrote frequently to Zederbaum's journal in St. Petersburg. At the same time, I did my best to improve the synagogal service at Kischineff by providing a new and handsome House of Prayer, with a good choir, and by removing from the service all objectionable features. This I accomplished with a general concurrence. In such ways as these my activities on Israel's behalf, during this my fourth decade, were mainly practical. My conviction now was that the time for writing and theorizing was gone by—that what our people mainly needed was in the first place active, healthy employment, which might take them out of their miserable trafficking in silks and satins, gold and silver rarities, embroideries, and the like—that even our boast to have first created and then ruled the mercantile system of the modern world was no longer maintainable; that, in fact, we are, and must remain, as the prophet Amos tells us, “a little one” among the nations. Amos 7:2,5 To thoughts like these I gave expression in an essay which appeared in Zederbaum's journal, whose Hebrew title may be rendered, “Hasty Scribes and Boastful Traders.”

And so, I enter on my present and fifth life's decade, and the period of the movement toward Christianity among the Jews of Russia. Many events in its first years turned my mind to fresh problems on behalf of Israel. The death of the just, gentle, high-minded sovereign Alexander II, was followed by terrible persecutions which broke out in Jelisabitgrad, Warsaw, Keiff, Balta, and other places, and the flight or banishment of many thousand Jews to America and Palestine.

These awful occurrences helped me at length to recognize Him of whom Moses and the Prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, who said of Himself (John 18:37), “To this end was I born and came into the world, that I may bear witness unto the Truth. Everyone that is of the Truth heareth My voice,” whom I now recognize as my Lord and my God.

Here I lay down my pen, and lifting up my eyes to Him who now sitteth on the right hand of the Majesty on high, I say to Him, “Wilt Thou still be angry with us? Shall Thy wrath burn like fire forever? Wilt Thou not turn again and quicken us, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee?” O that I might hear what God the Lord will say concerning us, that He would speak peace to His people and to His saints, so that they turn not again to folly! Yet is His salvation nigh to them that fear Him, that Glory may dwell in our land. Amen.

NEW ENGLANDER  
AND  
YALE REVIEW.  
1890.

VOLUME XVI, NEW SERIES.  
VOLUME LII, COMPLETE SERIES.

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**NULLIUS IN OBLIVIONEM SCISSUS**

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WILLIAM L. KINGSLEY, EDITOR.

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ARTICLE VI.—THE BAPTISM, IN BERLIN, OF JOSEPH RABINOWITZ (A RUSSIAN JEW), BY AN AMERICAN CLERGYMAN.

OCCASIONAL references in the newspapers to the person and work of Joseph Rabinowitz\* have made the public more or less familiar with the fact that in Southern Russia there is an interesting movement among the Jews towards Christianity. Many may desire to learn more particularly what the movement is, and how it originated.

The condition of the Jews in Bessarabia has been a pitiable one in every way. The Russian government, intolerant as it dares to be towards any but adherents of the Greek Church, has aggravated the wretchedness, which in any case was bad enough. Rabinowitz, a lawyer and a leader among the Jews, residing at Kischinev, had long felt deeply the burden of their condition, and had pondered over the question what could be done to relieve it. He endeavored to turn his fellow Jews more into agricultural life; but his efforts were unsuccessful. He then debated whether deliverance was not to be sought by colonizing in the Holy Land. This notion for a time took strong possession of his mind. Finally he visited Palestine in order to see what could be done by way of realizing the scheme. All this while he was a zealous Jew, having no thought of abandoning the faith of his fathers. He had in fact little acquaintance with Christianity. There had been for some time a German Lutheran missionary in Kischinev, named Faltin, who acted as chaplain to the Lutherans in the Russian army stationed at that place, and who had also gathered a few Jewish converts into his church, but Rabinowitz had no acquaintance with him. Of course he knew something about Christianity, but he had only a prejudiced and distorted notion of it. But a copy of Professor Delitzsch's Hebrew New Testament had come into his hands; and he had read this with some interest, in order to learn more exactly what the religion

\* Or, Rabinówitsch (accent on the third syllable).

of Jesus was. But he still looked for a regeneration of Israel only in some kind of reform which would leave Judaism intact.

It was when in this state of mind that in 1882 he visited Palestine, full of the plan of opening a way for the removal of his people to the land of promise. The more he investigated the matter, the more impracticable his scheme appeared to him. He abandoned it before he left the country. But more than ever was he moved, by the sight of the place rendered sacred to him by Jewish history, to find out if possible, what could be done to elevate his fellow Jews. It was while he was thus brooding over what had become almost a passion with him, that one day, as he was standing on the Mount of Olives looking down on the city of David, the question forced itself upon him, as if put by another man: "What if, after all, Jesus was the real Messiah?" He gave no hint to anyone of the thought that had sprung up within him; but he could not get rid of it. As he saw the Suez Canal on his return, he said to himself: "If only there could be a Lesseps to connect the Old Testament and the New!" After his return he gave himself to a more careful study of both Testaments. At length, little by little, the thought which had come as a mere query became a conviction. "Jesus, our brother, is the Christ"—this is the truth which Rabinowitz, in the course of a year after it begun to dawn on him, was ready to proclaim, and did proclaim as he had opportunity, to those with whom he came into contact. In the Jews' rejection of Jesus he saw the ultimate cause of their lamentable condition. The Old Testament became flooded with a new light, when he came to see, as he expressed it, that "Abraham is nothing, David is nothing, without Christ." He told his family and friends that "the way of the Jews into the Promised Land is not through the Mediterranean, but through the Jordan, i. e., through baptism into Christ. His own family, and his brother, also a man of influence, were among the first to join him in his new belief. He now felt himself to be called to act the part of an evangelist among the Jews. He saw what a spiritual slavery they were under in their subjection to the petty casuistries and subtleties of the Talmud. He determined to do his utmost to break down that tyranny and to introduce his people into the liberty of the gospel.

It was not till after he had reached the point of full conviction that he visited Pastor Faltin, and conferred with him concerning his Christian faith. The question now before him was whether, like other converted Jews of Kischinev, he should be baptized and received into the Lutheran Church by Pastor Faltin. This would seem to have been the most obvious course. But Rabinowitz doubted—not that he hesitated about being baptized, but he had a scheme in his mind which made baptism at the hands of Faltin seem to him unadvisable. That scheme was to devote himself to the work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to his Israelite brethren with a view to the gathering of *an independent body of Jewish-Christian believers*. Being baptized by the Lutheran pastor at Kischinev would have seemed to be, even if it would not necessarily have been, an identification of himself with the Lutheran communion. He did not wish to expose the movement which he hoped to inaugurate to unnecessary embarrassments. He knew the bitter scorn felt by the Jews toward those who are recreant to their religion and their race. He knew also how strong was the jealousy cherished by the Russians and the Russian government toward Germans and German Lutherans. He conceived that these obstacles would be much mitigated, if the Jews, in becoming Christians, should yet not cease in a certain sense to be Jews. It seemed to him, therefore, the wisest policy not to be baptized by Pastor Faltin; and in this judgment Faltin himself acquiesced. It was in 1884 that the matter had reached this point. In the spring of 1885 Rabinowitz visited Germany, in order to confer with Delitzsch (with whom he had already had some correspondence) and others interested in Jewish missions, with regard to his desires and purposes. Delitzsch had been doubtful at first about the wisdom of the scheme. But personal conference with Rabinowitz himself overcame his doubts, and he entered heartily into the convert's plan. He and the others who took part in the conference (among them Professor Strack of Berlin and some English Christians) agreed that Rabinowitz had better not be baptized by a Lutheran, nor by a German, nor in Leipzig (the headquarters of the Lutheran Missionary Society), but in Berlin, by some English-speaking minister whose ecclesiastical connec-

tions were such that the embarrassments above mentioned would be obviated as much as possible. And so it happened that I, being a Congregationalist, and an American one at that, and able to communicate with him through German and English, was thought to be a suitable person to perform the rite. I had read Delitzsch's account of the Bessarabian movement a year before, and had written a brief account of it for an American paper; but I had seen nothing further about it, and was ignorant of the fact that Rabinowitz had come to Germany till one morning Professor Strack (whom I had till then never seen) called on me, and after the briefest introduction of himself and presentation of the question whether I had heard about Rabinowitz and his work, astonished me by asking, "Will you baptize him?" As soon as I learned what the facts were, I readily consented. Rabinowitz, I learned, was at a hotel not many minutes away from where I was lodging; and it was my privilege, as well as my duty, to see him and talk with him with reference to his Christian faith, his experience, and his hopes. I was satisfied that he was a genuine Christian, although, coming from so different an environment, he naturally had some notions which to me seemed visionary or fantastic. At bottom, however, he seemed to be grounded in the Christian faith. One or two incidents may serve to illustrate the traits of the man. It is customary, when an Israelite is baptized in Germany, for him to assume a new name—a distinctively Christian name. Rabinowitz had been told this; and he had at first given his consent, and wished to be named Paul. But afterwards he reflected that the laws in Russia would make such a change of name practically impossible; he would not be allowed to bear the new name at his home, so that to be called by another than his own at his baptism would seem to be an empty form. He told me this; and as I saw no necessity of a change of name, I made no objection. But when Rabinowitz's change of mind was reported to his German friends, some of these at first insisted that he must be persuaded to consent to receive the new name. Rabinowitz, however, was firm, but calm, in insisting that under the circumstances to assume a new name would be an idle form, not consistent with the simplicity of a religion which requires one's

communication to be "Yea, yea," or "Nay, nay," not both at a time. Fortunately the scruple of the Germans was relieved by my showing, in a printed report of a similar baptism, that the candidate's name had not been changed.

Another thing that for a while threatened to mar the smoothness of the procedure was this: it is customary, at such baptisms, for the candidate to avow his assent to the Apostles' Creed. Rabinowitz, however, had worked out a creed of his own—one which had been the outgrowth of his own experience, and, while it was fully Christian, yet laid special stress on Jesus as the Messiah prophesied of, and looked for, by the covenant people of God. He wished, when he received baptism, to express his belief in the form which he had carefully elaborated. "That is *my* belief," he said, "can you baptize me?" He had no objections to the Articles of the Apostles' Creed; but he wished to avow his Christian faith in a way expressive of the manner in which the faith had come to him. Here, too, as I regarded his creed as quite satisfactory—more so in some respects than the other—I saw no reason for resisting his will. But others, and among them the pastor at whose church the rite was to be administered, were at first disposed to insist uncompromisingly on his assenting to the Apostles' Creed. I undertook to induce him to yield the point; but he was firm. It seemed to him important—almost a matter of principle—that he should be permitted to express his faith in his own form. I could not have the heart to press the matter, and reported that, if I was to administer the rite, I must have liberty to exercise some discretion as to the formulæ to be used, and that I thought it wise to yield to Rabinowitz's wish. The others consented; and on March 24, 1885, the ceremony took place in the presence of a few Christians, all of whom were enjoined to keep the matter private for the present, lest the Jews, hearing of it, might be disposed to telegraph word to Russia and stir up trouble before Rabinowitz could get back. He did not wait, however, till his return, before he announced to his friends in Kischinev the step which he had taken. He hastened home nevertheless, as soon as possible, in order to enter on his work.

The foregoing account will have given the impression that Rabinowitz is a resolute character. Possibly he may seem to be too self-willed. I am inclined, from my personal acquaintance with him, rather to say that he is a man of strong convictions and earnest purpose, willing to take advice, glad of the sympathy and help of Christian friends, but unwilling to surrender his judgment regarding matters wherein he is confident that he is better qualified to judge than his advisers. He knows the Jews of Southern Russia, and thinks he understands the best way of winning them away from their superstitions into the acceptance of the gospel. For one I am disposed to approve his course and cordially wish and pray for his success. When we consider the peculiar difficulties which beset mission work among the Jews, and the slight success which has hitherto attended the efforts to bring them to an adoption of Christianity, it certainly is worth the while to encourage a project which aims to avoid some of the obstacles which have hitherto stood in the way. The continued practice of circumcision and the observance of the seventh day of the week may seem to involve too much of what Paul condemns in his Epistle to the Galatians; but we must remember that to the Jews Paul himself became as a Jew, and that what Rabinowitz proposes to concede in these matters is only what was practiced by the Jewish-Christians at the outset. He does not expect these distinctively Jewish observances to be permanently retained. But temporarily, as a harmless concession to the weakness of those who cannot easily be made to throw off at once all Jewish feelings and prejudices, he would let them continue, so that the converts, while Christians, may still not be required suddenly and violently to renounce their name and race. The establishment of a Jewish-Christian Church, as an institution distinct from other Christian Churches, would only be analogous to that of an English or Swedish or French Church. Distinctions of nationality and of language necessarily involve certain restrictions in the form of the Christianity which is adopted. As the Japanese are moving towards the establishment of a Japanese Christian Church, so the Jews, being a separate race, may legitimately have a Christian Church of their own. There is every reason for believing that this policy is likely to be much more success-

ful than that of requiring every converted Jew at once to tear himself away from all connection with his race. There are unfortunately only too many who would be glad to monopolize Rabinowitz's work and make it inure to the aggrandizement of their own particular Church. As over against them it is well that Rabinowitz has a will of his own; for dependent, as he is to a considerable extent on pecuniary help from well-wishing Christians, it requires some force of character to insist on keeping his movement independent of other ecclesiastical organizations.

The movement is embarrassed somewhat by the slowness of the Russian government to give liberty to Rabinowitz to baptize his converts. Probably the desire to get the Jewish-Christians into the Greek Church makes the authorities hesitate to give its sanction to a movement which seems too much like Protestantism. In his last letter to me, written a year ago last July, Rabinowitz says (I translate from the Hebrew in which it is written): "I am not able to congratulate myself upon having received permission of the head of the government to baptize all those who desire to take refuge in the shadow of faith in the Son of the Living God, without changing their *name*, their *tongue*, and their *costume*, and to complete the organization of the Church of the Sons of Israel—'the Sons of the New Covenant'—upon the foundation of the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, to my joy, and to the joy of all Christians who are waiting in faith for the consolation of Israel in the Lord, I am able to tell you that thousands of the Jews dwelling in darkness and the shadow of death have begun by my agency to direct their feet towards the ways of peace, to know the salvation of their people, the forgiveness of sins, and to believe in the Son of God. Every Sabbath the house of prayer, 'Bethlehem,' in Kischinev, is full of men, women, and children, who hear, in the fear of God and with love to their Saviour Jesus, the holy gospel which I preach before them. Almost every day I receive into my house travelers, Jews who come from afar to inquire about the word of the Messiah. Also I receive many letters and cards from all quarters of Russia from Jews who desire to connect themselves with our congregation in

Kischinev. I take delight in the favor of God upon the distribution of sermons in the language of Russia, in Hebrew, in German, and in the Jargon (a mixture of Hebrew and Russian, the language used by the Jews in Bessarabia, where Rabinowitz lives), the sweet savor of the knowledge of Christ in all the dwelling places of the Jews in Russia. And we are continually waiting for the acceptable time and the day of deliverance, and to hear from the mouth of the government the words: 'Rise up, and be baptized and wash yourselves from your sins; and go, serve Jehovah. Also your name, and your language take, as ye have said, and bless me also' (a paraphrase of Ex. xii., 32)." Further on, alluding to the wish I had expressed that he would keep himself and his adherents from all entanglements which might come from the zealots of ecclesiasticism, he says: "My dear brother, do not give heed to the voices that go out . . . against me and against my work in Russia. . . . Know that they go up from the midst of the hearts of men whose eye is evil towards me because I have not put my neck and the necks of my brethren who follow me under the yoke of *their Church*, and who are ashamed and confounded in their expectation of leading us captive to human teachers. . . . Be confident that the love of God will be continually with me. I shall live and proclaim the gospel to my brethren who are weary and heavy laden; for only in the Son of God (not in the sons of changing churches) can they find rest to their souls; for surely his yoke is easy, and his burden is light."

It would be idle to try to predict what the outcome of this movement will be. But there can be no doubt that it is one in which all Christians may well feel the deepest interest. So far as human judgment can discern, the movement is an eminently hopeful one.

C. M. MEAD.



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# Rabinowitz and Lichtenstein

Kai Kjaer-Hansen

Some interesting events in Budapest occurred a century ago in October of 1891. One of the people involved was Joseph ben David Rabinowitz, the then well-known Russian Hebrew Christian from Kishinev in Bessarabia who in 1885-86 had formed a congregation called "Israelites of the New Covenant." The other key person was Rabbi Isaak Lichtenstein (not to be confused with Yehiel Lichtenstein, Rabinowitz's brother-in-law who taught at the Institutum Jadaicum in Leipzig). Rabbi Isaak Lichtenstein worked in Hungary and was also a well-known Jewish Christian. A third key person was Rabinowitz's wife, who, together with their daughter Rachel, had come with Rabinowitz to Budapest on a three-day stay.

## I. Rabbi Rabinowitz

On 5 October 1891 a message sent from Budapest set the telegraph ticking in Kishinev, Bessarabia. The telegram had only two words: "Mama gerettet" ("Mother saved"). The sender was Joseph Rabinowitz. The recipients were his children. "Mama" was his wife.

### A. *General Background*

In 1882 Joseph Rabinowitz had travelled to Palestine to look into the possibility of a Jewish settlement there for the hard-pressed Russian Jews. Immigration to Israel might be an answer to the Jewish question. His encounter with Palestine was a disappointment. Yet he returned to his hometown of Kishinev as a new person; he had come to faith in Yeshua the Messiah.

There are many indications that he did not travel to Palestine with the hope and desire of becoming a believer in Jesus. Yeshua met him and took him by surprise. Yet even when Jesus takes someone by surprise, something ordinarily precedes the creation of faith in the heart. In this case Rabinowitz many years earlier had been given a Hebrew New Testament. How much or how little he had read in it remains uncertain. Compared to his subsequent study of it, he had read little. Compared to what other Russian Jews of that time had read, he had read much. In any case, he brought it along on his journey. A few words from the New Testament came to his mind while he was sitting on the Mount of Olives. The lesson is that

distributing copies of the New Testament bears fruit. We may not see the fruit ourselves. Many Jews, however, who have come to faith in Jesus have testified that at some time they were given a New Testament and that they had peeked into it—sometimes secretly. It is a "dangerous" thing to peek into a New Testament, even if it is done secretly. For the Word of God testifying of Jesus may overcome prejudice.

Back in Kishinev Rabinowitz established himself as a lawyer, but when he began telling his clients of his new-found faith, his business suffered. Rabinowitz buried himself in Scripture, and in time his faith gained in clarity.

### *B. Rabinowitz and Baptism*

#### *1. The Baptism of the Family*

In March of 1885 Rabinowitz was baptized in Berlin. While he was in Palestine in 1882, his eldest son had been baptized in St. Petersburg, where he was a student. Rabinowitz's three daughters were baptized in Rohrbach in October of 1887 by the Hebrew Christian A. Venetianer. Rabinowitz's two other sons were baptized in October of 1888. Of his immediate family only his wife had not yet been baptized. E. H. Leitner, a clergyman in Constantinople, described her, after his visit to Kishinev in 1887, as a formerly "fanatical Jewess who now loves Jesus and together with Magdalene calls him 'Rabboni,' that is, 'my Master.'"

The baptism of Mrs. Rabinowitz took place in Budapest in the meeting hall of the Free Church of Scotland. The Reverend Andrew Moody writes of this occasion as follows:

We have had several baptisms during the year, the most interesting being that of Mrs. Rabinowitz, the wife of Mr. Joseph Rabinowitz of Kischineff, the well-known Hebrew Christian reformer. He was himself baptized some years ago in Berlin by Mr. Mead, an American pastor, it being his desire to confess in baptism the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour, but not to be received into any of the existing churches in Russia. His children followed and now his beloved wife. When her husband took the decisive step,

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she had shed tears at the thought that one of such high repute in Israel and so dear to her should bend the knee before the despised Jesus of Nazareth, but she had herself soon after, responding to the call "Come and see," had her own eyes opened to behold the glory of Him who came out of Nazareth, and it was with joy that she now confessed her faith in Him as her own Saviour. The event was very touching and solemn. After the service, which took place on the afternoon of Monday, 5th October, Mr. Rabinowitz telegraphed home, "Mama gerettet" ("Mother saved"). On the evening of the day following he delivered a lecture about Jesus in the large hall of our school building. There was a large attendance, and one or two prominent men of the Jewish community were present. Next day he had an interesting interview with Rabbi Lichtenstein, who, on my invitation, came in from Tapio-Szele to see him. Miss Rachel Rabinowitz, who came with her parents, remained here till Christmas, and had the opportunity of seeing something of our school work and of the mission work generally.

The reason why Rabinowitz did not himself baptize his children and his wife is that the Russian authorities would not allow him to administer baptism. The reason why he and his family were not baptized in Kishinev by the Lutheran pastor Rudolf Faltin, with whom Rabinowitz was on good terms at the beginning of his public stand, is that he would then have had to renounce his Jewish identity. These points require some elaboration.

## *2. The Baptism of Rabinowitz Himself*

Rabinowitz was baptized, as previously noted, in Berlin in March of 1885. This action came as a shock to Rudolf Faltin, the Lutheran pastor in Kishinev. If, however, Rabinowitz had been baptized by Faltin, he would have become a Lutheran and, according to Russian law of the day, he would have ceased to be a Jew. Rabinowitz, contrariwise, desired ardently to retain his Jewish identity. Rabinowitz had already discussed the question thoroughly with Wilhelm Faber, who was right hand to Franz Delitzsch, when Faber in 1885

was in Kishinev for the second time. In the course of those conversations Rabinowitz gradually came to believe in the sacramental nature of baptism and so in its application to infants as well as adults. He adopted, then, the understanding of baptism expressed in the Lutheran Confessions.

After discussions in Leipzig with, among others, Franz Delitzsch and John Wilkinson, arrangements were made for Rabinowitz to be baptized in Berlin—under quite extraordinary circumstances. He was baptized in a Bohemian Lutheran church by a Congregationalist (Methodist) pastor and professor, C. M. Mead, from Andover, Massachusetts. In the presence of a few invited people Rabinowitz was baptized using a creed written by himself in Hebrew—after having testified to being in complete concurrence with the Apostles' Creed. In this way Rabinowitz was baptized into the universal church of Christ without losing his Jewish identity. Delitzsch recognized this end and defended Rabinowitz when he was later attacked.

### *3. The Baptism of Others*

Rabinowitz himself, then, was baptized, but he never received permission to baptize or to administer the sacraments. The authorities would only allow him to function as a preacher. Although we may speak of his "congregation," it must be borne in mind that he was never given permission to establish a church in the biblical sense. It goes without saying that a church in the biblical sense cannot exist without baptism and holy communion. Such being the case, it is no wonder that Rabinowitz's movement crumbled after his death. In 1887 it looked as if this situation could be avoided. Some members of his congregation were baptized in Rohrbach by the Hungarian Jewish Christian A. Venetianer. The authorities, however, quickly put a stop to that procedure, possibly owing to appeals from Faltin or others in the Lutheran church of Kishinev.

## **II. Rabbi Lichtenstein**

### *A. Conversations with Rabinowitz*

Concerning the encounter between Rabinowitz and Lichtenstein

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on 7 October 1891 Andrew Moody, as we have seen, wrote simply: "Next day he had an interesting interview with Rabbi Lichtenstein, who, on my invitation, came in from Tapio-Szele to see him." The words "interesting interview" are sufficiently vague to allow any interpretation. Three weeks after this encounter Rabinowitz gives a more specific account of the results. In a letter of 30 October 1891 to H. Müller of the German Central Agency, Rabinowitz tells him he had met with Lichtenstein at Moody's house on two occasions, and he proceeds to criticize Lichtenstein's Christianity. By virtue of their conversations and his reading of Lichtenstein's book, *Judaism and Christianity*, Rabinowitz reached the conclusion that Lichtenstein had not taken the crucial step away from Judaism, had not yet realized that one cannot put a patch on an old garment. Rabinowitz expressed the hope that Lichtenstein might be granted "a living and pure faith in the only begotten Son, Jesus."

Already in a letter of 22 February 1889 Rabinowitz had written to Moody that Moody should greet Lichtenstein and remind him of what was written in John 12:23-24 and Romans 6:4: "And Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'" "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Rabinowitz continued the letter, which was published in the annual report of the Free Church of Scotland, with some words clearly disapproving of Lichtenstein's failure to be baptized. "If Rabbi Lichtenstein verily loves his people Israel . . . let him be baptized." By being baptized he would set a good example to be followed by others, something of which there is more need than theological learning.

### *B. Conversations with Others*

Rabinowitz, of course, was by no means the first to urge baptism on Lichtenstein, nor would he be the last. Dr. Somerville, for instance, a prominent figure of the Free Church of Scotland, had done so in the autumn of 1888. In a report filed in 1889 the church's collaborator in Budapest stated:

Dr. Somerville, in writing to me recently, gave expression to his fear that he [Lichtenstein] would die without being baptized, and that thus his testimony might be weakened, and in measure lost. He does not as yet take the same view of the matter as we do, but still clings tenaciously to the idea that his testimony has greater weight because he is not baptized; but while we cannot dislodge him from his position by our arguments, we may hope and pray that he may be further instructed and led by the Spirit of God.

Clearly this was not the first time that baptism had come up for discussion between Rabinowitz and the Scots. In the same vein Andrew Moody, before bringing Rabinowitz into the picture in the way previously noted, had already written of Lichtenstein as follows:

Our friend the Rabbi of Tapio-Szele, whom I have happily the opportunity of seeing from time to time, still maintains somewhat the same position as he did a year ago. When in the Tyrol I addressed an earnest appeal to him, the purport of which was: "And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized!" He replied: "Best thanks to you, reverend sir, for remembering me when you are at a distance. Be assured that your form hovers before my eyes, and that every day I pray fervently to the Almighty for your complete recovery. As regards your pious wish, I regret that in the interest of the holy cause itself I cannot fulfil it. It is high time that a Jew, as a Jew, should take his place at the gate of the camp and cry, 'Kiss the Son lest He be angry, and ye perish from the way.' 'Do homage to Jesus as the rightful heir to the Kingdom.' 'For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.' He is that heavenly ladder which stands on the earth, the top of which touches the heaven, and the angels of God ascend and descend upon it, and the Lord Himself stands above it. My adversaries agitate without ceasing against me, but I have built upon a rock, and am therefore not moved. Saluting you in the name of God, His Anointed, and the

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Holy Spirit who hath made both one, I am, yours respectfully,  
J. Lichtenstein, District Rabbi.

Lichtenstein's view, then, was firmly established by the time that he encountered Rabinowitz in 1891 and was unlikely to change.

### Conclusion

Lichtenstein, in fact, declined the counsel of Rabinowitz and others to the end and so died unbaptized in 1909. To Rabinowitz, on the other hand, baptism was important, so important that he would allow nothing to prevent it. At the same time, it was important that it take place in such a manner as would enable him to retain his Jewish identity. There is a message for us today in the telegram which Rabbi Rabinowitz sent to his children on 5 October 1891: "Mama gerettet." In spite of all the external difficulties and internal controversies in 1891, there were Jews who were being saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus the Messiah. The same things can happen today. The difficulties which we face are no greater than those experienced by the Christians of a century ago.

The original form of this essay was delivered by Kai Kjaer-Hansen to the Eighth North American Coordinating Committee Meeting of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism. (The original has here been abridged by omitting various points of application to the work of the particular organization which he was addressing.)