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LOOKING FOR CLUES

Baptists and Jews in Southeastern Europe before the Holocaust The Jewish Baptist Missionary, Moses Richter

Chernovtsy, main city of the region of Bukovina, was after Siebenbürgen in Transylvania the second predominantly German-speaking area in Romania. Nevertheless it was still considered the Romanian Jerusalem because mainly Jews lived there. Apart from the Lutheran Church, there was a German and a Romanian Baptist Church. Chernovtsy, which now belongs to the Ukraine, was the home of the German-speaking Jewish poet, Paul Celan. He wrote about Bukovina: 'It is the region where a large number of Chassidic tales have their roots, those that Martin Buber retold in German. It was an area where books and people lived together'.⁷⁴

Moses Richter came from this city. He was a young Jewish Christian and member of the Baptist Church there. In 1931 he was called by the Federation of German Baptists in Romania as a Missionary to the Jews.⁷⁵ He had just completed two years of studies at the Bible School at St Andrä in Kärnten, Austria. He began his missionary work among the Bukovinian Jews in November 1931 with public lectures, services, and Bible classes. On Sundays he spoke in German and Yiddish in the German Baptist Church, on Wednesdays in the Romanian. Newspaper advertisements and pamphlets invited people to the meetings. Church members increased the interest by singing Yiddish songs. Preacher Johann Schlier from the German Baptist Church frequently assisted him.⁷⁶

Moses Richter introduced his home city, Chernovtsy, to the readers of the *Wahrheitszeugen*, the regular publication of the German Baptists, on 28 February 1932:

Here there are many specifically Jewish political parties, like the Zionists, who want a home for the Jews in Palestine, the Socialists and the Confederates, who are completely opposed to Zionism and to the Hebrew language. There are also many synagogues, many Rabbis and many schools where the teaching is in Hebrew and Yiddish. In such a town it is very necessary to preach the Kingdom of Christ to Jews.⁷⁷

After his call Moses Richter requested help from the churches:

The main necessity is for all brothers and sisters to support this work of God with prayer from the bottom of their hearts. Tell me, dear brother and sister, how you love a Jew and I will tell you what sort of a Christian you are.⁷⁸

The wide window-front of the meeting-place of the Romanian Christians close to the town centre was adorned with an open Hebrew Bible. Next to it was a big poster: 'Jeshua Hamashiach, who forgives our sins and will soon end the sufferings of Israel, is preached here.'⁷⁹ The reaction of those addressed was informative: many Jews came to the lectures and afterwards there were often debates. There was

no desire to keep separate and only joint meetings with the German church took place on principle: 'When Christ's teaching is preached, one should seek unity not division'.⁸⁰ Jewish children went to the Baptist Sunday School. Moses Richter visited Jewish homes.

However, they encountered resistance and difficulties. The Chief Rabbi, Dr Mark, warned against the meetings in the Baptist church,⁸¹ yet the people returned. Despite some ridicule Moses Richter experienced this too: 'Some Jews are surprised ... but are glad when they see that there are Christians who are still kind to them.' One day Moses Richter received a visit from a sofer, a Thora scribe and learned Jew with a patriarch's beard and peies. This man confessed that once even he had worshipped the Saviour Jeshua when his only daughter was ill: 'O Jeshua of Nazareth! If you exist you can heal my daughter!' The child was healed. Since that day he had much sympathy for the Saviour but in secret, for fear of the Rabbis.⁸²

One day the missionary to the Jews was invited to a public debate with Rabbi Rosenbach. Moses Richter said Rosenbach imagined he had been given the great task from Heaven to build the Third Temple in Jerusalem. Although Moses Richter lost the debate, all the audience was amazed when the Rabbi said on departing: 'I am glad to have got to know you, young man, for I need Jews who believe in Christ for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.'⁸³

Moses Richter wrote about his service among the Jews in November 1932:

At this time when so many 'Christians' have been poisoned by false Nationalism and try to be genuine Christians and Germans by hating the Jews, there are still Christians and Germans who fulfil God's command: 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, said your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her ... that her iniquity is pardoned'.⁸⁴

Thus Richter demonstrated that for him Christianity had priority over the nation. Christians should show friendliness towards Israel by preaching Jesus the Messiah at a time of general hatred towards Jews.

Johannes Fleischer, the Baptist preacher in Bucharest, gave similar reasons for the mission to Jews which he set against widespread anti-semitism: 'The more one makes Jews the scapegoat for our troubled world, the more they need to be evangelized ... Not hatred of the Jews but mission to the Jews is our task.'⁸⁵

Just as our fathers could not refuse the Gospel to the nations around them, we cannot ignore the many Jews, as the Gospel 'is to the Jews first' (Romans 1.16). And when people sometimes say the Jews are the most reprehensible race, a curse on humanity, then they needed redemption through Jesus all the more.⁸⁶

He also made it clear that a Jew who believed in the Messiah should by no means cut himself off from his Jewish roots: 'A Jew always remains a Jew and should remain so, but recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the true Messiah and give Him his life.'⁸⁷

Max Boden (*Wahrheitszeugen* 18 February 1934) gave detailed reasons for the mission to Jews as an expression of thanks and love towards Israel. This was 'an ancient task'.⁸⁸ In May 1933 Moses Richter was full of hope in his report that the name of Christ was worshipped in three Jewish families in Chernovtsy. In them he saw the basis for a future messianic church there.⁸⁹ In December 1935 the baptism of a Jew was mentioned.⁹⁰

Moses Richter undertook mission journeys, speaking to German and Jewish audiences. In April 1932 he was in Tarutino, Bessarabia, in May and September 1932 in Siebenbürgen. Preacher Georg Teutsch from the Baptist church in Hermannstadt (Sibiu) reported:

Brother Richter published in the newspaper and through the invitations sent out that his subject was 'Salvation comes from the Jews' ... Every nation tries to present Christ according to its own nationalism and not as He is presented in the Bible. As long as this is the case, the Jews will not accept Him.⁹¹

In May 1936 the German Baptist Church in Bucharest celebrated its eightieth anniversary. Among those bringing congratulations was the representative of a Jewish-Christian Baptist Church: 'Brother Awerbuch from Kishineff in Bessarabia spoke on behalf of the Jewish-Christian Baptist Church there and for the Russian Baptists of Bessarabia.'⁹² The director of the English Mission to the Jews in Bucharest, the Anglican minister, H.L. Ellison, gave the celebration sermon, declaring that the church and his missionary society to the Jews had been 'closely connected right from the beginning'. A great sensation was caused when Ellison was baptized in the German Baptist Church in Bucharest on 6 December 1936.⁹³

In the report of the Protestant Church in Chernovtsy a remark from 1939 has survived about the question of 'Jewish baptisms':

Even today we are still of the opinion that the Church seriously violates its missionary responsibility should it reject a Jewish candidate for baptism for racist or nationalist reasons and so refuse him entry into the fellowship of Christian faith.⁹⁴

Moses Richter reported regularly from December 1931 to January 1935 about his work as missionary to the Jews in the *Täuferbote* (Baptist Messenger), the monthly publication of the German Baptists in Southeastern Europe. In 1936 Hans Volk referred to the work in Chernovtsy.⁹⁵ The name of the Baptist missionary to the Jews appeared again in November 1935 in the report of the annual area conference, but then not until November 1938 when 'Brother Moses Richter writes from England "Thank God that I am well and can work here among my Jews!"'⁹⁶

On 20 June 1940 the northern part of Bukovina, including Chernovtsy, was occupied by Soviet troops and Jewish houses were laid waste and burnt to the ground. On 5 July 1941 units of the German and Romanian army reached Chernovtsy. Thousands of Jews, including Dr Abraham Mark, were murdered by Unit 10b and the reform temple was destroyed. From 30 July 1941 all Jews were

compelled to wear the yellow star. A ghetto was set up on 11 October 1941 and deportations to the concentration camp in Transnistria began. Few Jews returned. In 1944 Chernovtsy was regained and occupied by the Russian troops and was incorporated into the Ukraine.⁹⁷ How and why Moses Richter came to England and what happened to him afterwards is at present unknown.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted from U. Rudnick, 'Spurensuche: eine Reise nach Czernowitz' in *Friede über Israel: Zeitschrift für Kirche und Judentum* 78, 1995, Heft 3 (October), pp.109-39. About Paul Celan in Chernovtsy, see Israel Chalfan, *Paul Celan: Eine Biographie seiner Jugend*, Frankfurt 1979 (*Suhrkamp Tabu* 913, Frankfurt 1983).
- 2 The area conference when Moses Richter was called as missionary to the Jews took place in Tarutino, Bessarabia, a 'Russian-German little town' (*Täuferbote* 2, 1931, No.12, p.11).
- 3 After Johan Schlier (until January 1934) Hans Volk (until 1937) and Julius Furtscha (1938 to 1941) are the Baptist preachers in Chernovtsy (*Täuferbote* 5, 1934, No.3, p.5; 8, 1937, No.3/4, p.5; 10, 1939, No.8/9, p.8).
- 4 *Wahrheitszeuge* 1932, No.9, 28 February, p.71. A similar but more detailed report appeared in *Täuferbote* 2, 1931, No.12, p.15.
- 5 *Täuferbote* 2, 1931, No.12, p.15.
- 6 *ibid.* 3, 1932, No.88, pp.7f.
- 7 *ibid.* 3, 1932, No.1, p.7.
- 8 *ibid.* 3, 1932, No.3, p.7 (Also in *Sendbote* 80, 1932, No.19, p.7).
- 9 *ibid.* 3, 1932, No.12, p.9.
- 10 *ibid.* 2, 1931, No.12, p.15 (Also in *Wahrheitszeuge* 1932, No.9, 28 February 1932, p.71).
- 11 *ibid.* 3, 1932, No.11, p.7.
- 12 *ibid.* 3, 1932, No.8, p.4.
- 13 *ibid.* 6, 1935, No.12, pp.5f.
- 14 *ibid.* 6, 1935, No.12, p.6.
- 15 Max Boden, 'Die Judenmission, eine alte Aufgabe' in *Wahrheitszeuge* 1934, No.7 (18 February 1934) pp.52f. In contrast, Naphtali Rudnitzky, the great Baptist missionary to the Jews, rejects the expression 'Mission to the Jews' as 'the attempts of the Church to convert the Jewish people must be seen in their eyes as a serious insult. These attempts recall the worst periods of Jewish persecution ...' in 'Die Seele der Judenmission', *Wahrheitszeuge* 1929, No.46, pp.361f.
- 16 *Täuferbote* 4, 1933, No.5, p.7.
- 17 *ibid.* 6, 1935, No.12, p.6.
- 18 *ibid.* 3, 1932, No.6/7, p.9 (also in *Sendbote* 80, 1932, No.31, p.10).
- 19 *Wahrheitszeuge* 1936, No.32, p.255, and *Täuferbote* 7, 1936, No.6, p.4.
- 20 *ibid.* 7, 1936, No.12, pp.5f, and *Wahrheitszeuge* 1937, No.26, p.208. The *Täuferbote* added: 'This baptism caused great joy among the Jewish believers who all took part in communion and are also biblically baptized'.
- 21 E. Lebouton, *Die Evangelische Pfarrgemeinde Czernowitz zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen (1918-1940)*, Vienna 1969, p.56. In the same book the Baptist Church in Chernovtsy is also mentioned (p.50): 'In Chernovtsy alone there are two houses of prayer, one for the Adventists and one for the Baptists. Both are well frequented by the German population'.
- 22 *Täuferbote* 7, 1936, No.5, pp.6f.
- 23 *ibid.* 9, 1938, No.11, p.8.
- 24 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, Vol.4, 1971, articles about Bukowina par.1476f; Chernovtsy, Vol5, 1971, par.393-6. *Encyclopädie des Holocaust: Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden*, Vol.1 (editors: E. Jäckel, P. Longerich, J.H. Schoeps) Berlin 1993. Czernowitz pp.297f.; Bukowina pp.258-61. Raul Hilberg, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden*, Vol.1-3, Frankfurt 1990 (Vol.2 Rümänien, pp.811-58). Lea Rosh, E. Jäckel, *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland. Deportation und Ermordung der Juden. Kollaboration unter Verweigerung in Europa*. Hamburg 1990 (dtv Tabu 1992).

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