

**Irmina Gadowska**

*Department of Art History*

*University of Lodz*

*irmina.gadowska@uni.lodz.pl*

## **IN SEARCH OF SPIRITUALITY. RELIGIOUS REORIENTATION OR RADICAL ASSIMILATION? THE CASE OF MAREK SZWARC**

**Abstract:** For most of the assimilated Jews, religious reorientation was an alternative to Judaism – increasingly alien to them – and total secularization, and was frequently the only ticket to a career and an improvement of their social status. Only a few of them saw it as a profound religious experience which made them God-fearing, pious Catholics. The biography of Marek Szwarc, a Jewish sculptor, is an interesting material for research regarding his religious conversion. Szwarc, brought up in the spirit of Zionism, initially co-founded the secular culture based on non-religious identity. However, war, civilizational changes, and the crisis of traditional values changed his attitude to religion. This change was reflected in his works created for the expressionist group "Yung-yidish". For Szwarc the introduction of Christian iconography was motivated by the desire to emphasize the universal values associated with the spiritual rebirth of humanity. Even then, he acknowledged the visual "attractiveness" of Christianity, which, combined with expressionist or modernist influences, legitimized artistic progressivism as a manifestation of modern European culture. The turning point in the artist's career was his baptism on May 1, 1920 in Poznań. This paper is an attempt to examine the circumstances of his conversion, taking into account his biography, its social context, as well as the impact of this decision on his art.

**Keywords:** Jewish art, identity, conversion, Judaism, Jesus

The biography of Marek Szwarc – a Jewish sculptor coming from Zgierz – is an interesting material for research because of his religious conversion, which interested many representatives of Jewish intelligentsia, mostly the figures of science, culture and art. Szwarc's personality and views were formed primarily by his family home, as well as the artistic milieu of Paris, Łódź, and Poznań. In the early 1920s, after settling permanently in the French capital, the artist

met Jacques Maritain, whose philosophy ultimately determined the direction of the evolution of Szwarc's work. The turning point in Szwarc's career was his baptism on May 1, 1920 in Poznań.<sup>1</sup> This act proved to be fateful because of family and social relationships, and influenced the selection of specific themes that appear in the artist's works. This text is an attempt to examine the circumstances of Szwarc's conversion, taking into account his biography, its social context, as well as the impact of this decision on his art.

### Family home

Marek Szwarc (1892-1958) was born in Zgierz in the religious family of Isucher Szwarc and his wife Sara née Gliksman. The atmosphere of his family home, and above all, his father's personality and beliefs took a huge toll on the future sculptor. Isucher Moshe Szwarc was a famous Zionist activist who maintained contacts with outstanding representatives of Jewish culture: writers, publicists, political and social activists, such as Sholem Aleichem,<sup>2</sup> David Hirsh Nomberg,<sup>3</sup> Sholem Asch,<sup>4</sup> David Fryszman,<sup>5</sup> Nachum Sokolov.<sup>6</sup> Isucher published in important Jewish journals of Zionist orientation, available in both Hebrew and Polish: *Ha-Cefira*, *Ha-Szachar*, *Ha-Magid*, *Magid-Mishneh*, and others. He was also the author of several historical studies, e.g. a study on Tiberias, published in the Łódź weekly *Ha-Menorah* edited by Moshe Helman, or a series of historical texts titled "Barimte Kinder" [Famous Children] describing the history of Spanish and Portuguese Marranos.<sup>7</sup> The future artist's father was involved in spreading Zionist ideology; for many years he chaired the Agudat Ha-Cijonim (Zionist Organization), and he was also involved in the activities of various institutions working to help the Jewish community in Zgierz. Marek Szwarc, mentioning his father, stressed the importance of his worldview, whose

<sup>1</sup> E. Markowa, *Les annes de mariage*, TS in the private archive of Dominique Torrès, Paris, p. 11. The godparents of Mark and his wife Guina were artists associated with the Poznań "Bunt" [Rebellion]: Władysław Skotarek (1894-1969) and the poet Janina Przybylska. The circumstances of their baptism were described by Guina Szwarc (Markowa) in her autobiographical novel *Le Choix*. See. E. Markowa, *Le Choix*, Paris 1961 pp. 30-37.

<sup>2</sup> Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovich) (1859-1916), writer, considered one of the classics of Jewish literature.

<sup>3</sup> David Hirsh Nomberg (1876-1927), writer, journalist, political and social activist.

<sup>4</sup> Sholem Asch (1880-1957), a Jewish writer who wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish.

<sup>5</sup> David Fryszman (Frischmann) (1859-1922), writer and translator.

<sup>6</sup> Nachum Sokolow (1859-1836), writer, journalist and Zionist activist.

<sup>7</sup> Marrano - a term functioning since the 16<sup>th</sup> century referring to Jews who were forced to abandon their religion and convert to Christianity or Islam. This subject was also tackled by Marek's brother - Samuel, the author of the book *Neochrześcjanie w Portugalii w XII wieku* [Neo-Christians in Portugal in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century], Lisbon 1925.

essential element was the fight for the liberation of the Jews from the material and mental ghetto, the struggle for emancipation, and widespread opposition to the Hasidic<sup>8</sup> movements of Eastern Europe.

In Szwarc's memoirs, he describes his father as primarily interested in the intellectual aspect of Jewish religiosity, and as paying importance to tradition. Szwarc's mother represented a different model of religiosity: it was much more orthodox, and almost superstitious. The artist described his childhood fear of sin and his simultaneous rebellion against the superstitions, obscurantism, and backwardness of religious fanaticism. He wrote: "My youth was connected with the tradition of my father's and the faith of my mother (...) my doubts popped up when I was seven years old and committed a serious offence (...) Misfortune! I accidentally used a butter knife, the knife that was lying beside the plate with the sausage ... My conscience told me that I committed a sin, so I burst into tears. My childish heart sought help, which would stop the wrath of God." To remove the offense his mother took Szwarc to a *dayan*, who, having considered all the circumstances, recommended: "You have to stick a knife into the ground, leave it there for six hours, exactly six hours. Then put it into the fire, clean with sandpaper, and then all will be fine."<sup>9</sup>

Szwarc's later religious commitment and his fascination with Christian charity may have been the result of his resistance to this "wrath of God" and the guilt that was caused by the "folkish" piety of his mother. On the other hand, years later this yearning for spirituality directed him to Christianity, understood as a development and fulfillment of Judaism. Yet, in his youth, the dilemmas of faith were not that important to him. Under the influence of his father he leaned toward Zionism. The Szwarc's house was open to all those seeking knowledge; it welcomed and lodged various scholars, writers and artists, as well as ordinary Jewish students of Zgierz Trade School. Szwarc recalled: "We were brought up in reverence for the Jewish people and the love of knowledge as well as European culture. Zionism has found a fertile ground in our family and we dreamed about the Promised Land."<sup>10</sup> In 1914, Szwarc went to Odessa,<sup>11</sup> where he sculpted several busts of important personages of Jewish cultural life: the poet Shmuel Frug Simeon (1860-1916), Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), and the writer Mendele Sforim Moshe (1836-1917).<sup>12</sup> In the text describing

<sup>8</sup> M. Szwarc, *Mémoires entre deux Mondes*, Ressouvenance, Villers-Cotterêts 2010, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> M. Szwarc *Ku uczczeniu pamięci ojca mego Isuchera Schwarz* [In commemoration of the memory of my father Isucher Schwarz], TS in the library collection Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme in Paris, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Otto Schneid Papers. Correspondence before and after 1939. Marek Szwarc in: [https://archive.org/details/ottoschneid10\\_15](https://archive.org/details/ottoschneid10_15) [30.05.2015].

<sup>12</sup> He may have owed these commissions to the contacts his father or Szmuel Barabash, the father in law of his brother.

the war years and dedicated to the memory of Jankel Adler (1895-1949), he spoke of his youthful dreams of founding a Jewish Legion in order to liberate Palestine.<sup>13</sup>

### In independent Poland: “Art and the Jews”

In 1919 in Łódź, Marek Szwarc, Moshe Broderson (1890-1956) and Yankel Adler (1895-1949) founded the group Yung-yidish [Jung Idysz] – the first Jewish artistic avant-garde group in Poland with the program in the form of a manifesto. The artists and writers connected with the group represented different views; however, the common reference point for all of them was the search for the “national style”. Moshe Broderson, Jankel Adler, Icchok Brauner (Wincenty, Vincent) (1887-1944), Enoch Barczyński (1896-1941), turned to the Jewish tradition and folklore, where they tried to find the roots of “Jewishness”.

Szwarc, initially in favour of this concept, eventually took a critical stance against it. Jerzy Malinowski rightly pointed out a discordant note ringing in the declarations of the artists of Yung-yidish, torn between the sense of obligation to promote indigenous Jewish motifs, and the alluring universalism of international art.<sup>14</sup>

In 1910-1914, during his first stay in Paris, Szwarc actively contributed to the animated discussion on Jewish art among the Jewish artists-emigrants within the Ecole de Paris milieu. As a co-founder of the magazine *Machmadim*, he was looking for the sources of Jewish art, trying to determine its iconography, and by doing so confirm its existence as a distinct phenomenon. A few years later in 1919, in his article “Art and the Jews” which appeared in the comments section of the Łódź magazine *Tel Awiw*, he assessed the achievements of *Machmadim* as “too dilettantish to even bother to evaluate them.” *Machmadim*, just like many groups with a similar program, was aimed at populariz-

<sup>13</sup> M. Szwarc, “Hołd pośmiertny Jankelowi Adlerowi” [A posthumous tribute to Jankel Adler], in: *Jankel Adler 1895-1949*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf / Tel Aviv / Łódź 1985), ed. U. Krempel, K. Thomas, DuMont Buchverlag, Köln 1985, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> J. Malinowski, *Malarstwo i rzeźba Żydów Polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, Volume I, PWN, Warszawa 2000, p. 216. The problem of national style was important for many Jewish artists of the late 1910s. Debates on this issue took place in the previous century, under the influence of archaeological and historical research. They were closely related to modern development of Jewish art, not limited only to crafts and decorations of holy places, as well as attempts to define a new identity in the apparent crisis of the idea of assimilation. In 1910, in Almanach Żydowski another Lodz artist – Leopold Pilichowski (1869-1934), known to Szwarc, a friend of his father, engaged in promoting Zionism, published the article on “Sztuka żydowska” [Jewish Art], in which he tried to show the contribution of Jewish artists to contemporary visual culture.

ing the ornaments of the Beth Midrash Synagogues;<sup>15</sup> but true art, according to Szwarc, “does not know blissful nationalisms”. On the other hand, also the work of the artists seeking inspiration in the Orient or Oriental styling, created in, among others, Jerusalem Bezalel School of Crafts cannot be regarded as national. “Inappropriate understanding of national art – the term borrowed from the vocabulary of a political thriller – sparked the desire of some artists to nationalize art. However, it did not go anywhere beyond folk stylization.”<sup>16</sup>

In his text Szwarc stressed the role of the Bible as the basis for the creation of artistic images. He wrote of The Song of Songs, of Jewish sculpture and the Jewish prophets-painters with their awe-inspiring landscapes. He mentioned Moses retelling to Bezalel the divine recommendations for the construction of the tabernacle. “The Bible created Jews, the Jews created Talmud. The Talmudists created Christianity and I really do not know what is further from the Bible: its Talmudic understanding or the Catholic interpretation.”<sup>17</sup> The artist cited examples of the works of Western European religious art with biblical themes, where the content is just a pretext for the representations formally rooted in the tradition of Greek and Roman antiquity (such as Christ resembling Apollo, John the Baptist as Bacchus (da Vinci), Christ as a Titan (Michelangelo)). Therefore, such treatment of the Bible as a catalogue of characters and a collection of motifs led Szwarc to gradually separate art from religion. The article “Art and the Jews”, is on the one hand an attempt to capture the specificity of Jewish art, which according to the author was the effect of the nature of religion or religiosity, and on the other, it determines the place of Jewish artists in the history of Western art. Szwarc cites artistic traditions of different cultures and points to their understanding of the relationship with the deity and the world. He notes that “Art and religion were formed in the same womb: the need to idolize, to express feelings and depict artistic visions”,<sup>18</sup> but art as a need to recreate visions, from the point of view of Judaism was – as

<sup>15</sup> M. Szwarc, „Sztuka a Żydzi”, *Tel Awiw* 1919, R. 1, z. 4, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.188.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.187; The quotation reveals a crucial thought, important for defining Jewish art, but also because of the work of Szwarc himself. For the artist, the primary and only source of Jewish art was the word – understood as a graphic sign, symbolic designation of a concept, but also as a metaphysical principle in charge of the world and men. Basing on the Judaic Old Testament tradition, an important role is played by the concept of God’s Word, which creates (Genesis 1: 1-31; Psalm 33: 6) and reveals (Ps 147, 15.18). Both functions of God’s Word will reappear later – in modified form – in Christianity. In Christian thought, Logos is God, one of the three divine persons, in Christ unified with the human nature. In the Pauline tradition Christ, the Son of God, is identified with the Word-Logos coming from God, identical with His essence (Hebrews 1: 1-3). Logos precedes the creative act and is the principle of all creation (Col. 1: 15-17).

<sup>18</sup> M. Szwarc, *Sztuka a ...* p.185.

he wrote – an expression of paganism and contrary to the prohibitions in the Pentateuch.<sup>19</sup>

The magazine *Tel Awiw*, edited by Zygmunt Bromberg Bytkowski,<sup>20</sup> in which Szwarc's article appeared, was published in Łódź between 1919 and 1921. Its distinctive feature was its modest layout. The grey cover of the successive issues of *Tel Awiw* was decorated with the same drawing: the image of a young Jewish man in a turban – a Palestinian settler, by Arthur Szyk (1894-1951).<sup>21</sup> The inside was devoid of illustration, although several issues contained miniature likenesses of the people whose activities or work was commented upon on its pages.<sup>22</sup> The editor-in-chief, Zygmunt Bromberg Bytkowski (from Tarnów) was a headmaster of the Girls' Gymnasium [middle school] of the Women's Association of Jewish Secondary Schools in Łódź. He was also a member of the board and president of the Łódź Jewish Music and Literary Society "Hazomir" – an organization promoting Jewish culture and strongly oriented towards Zionism. Although Bytkowski was a Zionist activist himself, he did not detach himself (unlike many others) from the achievements of the Diaspora. In contrast to Theodor Herzl,<sup>23</sup> postulating the creation of new Jewish art and culture in Palestine, he acknowledged (like Martin Buber<sup>24</sup>) the necessity to cultivate national traditions contained in the "ideology of yiddishness".<sup>25</sup> The strong impact of Buber's ideas on the artistic milieu of Łódź, visible also in the ideas of the Yung-yidish group, can be explained by the familial relations of the philosopher and activist with the city.<sup>26</sup> In accord with Buber, Bytkowski paid particular attention to the native, i.e. Jewish diasporic artistic creation. In

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Zygmunt Bromberg-Bytkowski (1866-1923) – Jewish playwright, poet, art critic, Zionist activist.

<sup>21</sup> The issues differed only slightly in the presence or lack of information on the publishing house HAIBRI Hatzair (Łódź - Warsaw) or the printing house (of Emanuel Hamburg or M. Szeniak).

<sup>22</sup> About *Tel Awiw* see L. Głuchowska, "Poznan and Lodz. National Modernism and the International Avant-Garde. *Zdrój* (1917-1922), *Yung Idysz* (1919) and *Tel Awiw* (1919-1921)" in: *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Volume III*, Europe 1880-1940, ed. P. Brooker, S. Bru, A. Thacker, Ch. Weikop, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 1208-1233, 1228-1232.

<sup>23</sup> Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) – journalist, writer, political activist, founder of World Zionist Organization.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Buber (1878-1965) – Jewish philosopher, Zionist, religious scholar and researcher of Hasidism and Judaism.

<sup>25</sup> Such an attitude was characteristic of many intellectuals and artistic circles of the period and it resulted from the criticism of artificially created eastern styling, aesthetically foreign to the diaspora (at least at that time).

<sup>26</sup> Martin Buber's sister Natalia, married to Markus Braude (1869-1949), rabbi and social activist since 1920, was a teacher at the Girls Middle School of the Jewish Secondary Schools Association (the same school where Bytkowski was the headmaster).

the essay "Die Vergessen Kunst" the author described gravestones and their decorations, and the crafts related to religious life (e.g. candlesticks, lamps). As described after his death: "He found beauty where it radiated a rainbow of glitters, while others took the same beauty for granted."<sup>27</sup> Bytkowski emphasized the role of culture, he also reacted to the events essential for promoting Zionist ideas. So the themes of the articles appearing in the journal varied. *Tel Awiw* regularly acquainted its readers with the works of the poet Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), the writers An-ski, Saul Czernichowski (1875-1943), Isaac Lejb Peretz (1852-1915) and Yosef Chaim Brenner (1881-1921). In the first years of Polish independence, *Tel Awiw* tried to present the perspective of the development of Jewish culture in the context of the new territorial-political situation.

One of the consequences of Poland's regaining its independence after more than a hundred and twenty years of occupation was an increase in nationalist tendencies. The reconstruction of Polish identity in the face of the conflict with Lithuania, the Silesian uprisings, the war against Bolshevik Russia (1920) and the constant internal conflicts of the young state resulted in the rise of aversion toward strangers, including those already living in Polish territory. The post-war anti-Semitism which the antagonized political parties were eager to exploit, was additionally fueled by the Catholic Church which, with growing potency, made the willing-to-assimilate Jewish communities aware of the impossibility to peacefully coexist with the Christians in the long run. Michał Jarblum put it emphatically in his text from 1918, "A Pole of Jewish faith": "It would be a mistake to suppose that even a determined and consistent attempt to come closer to the culture of your environment is sufficient to be really part of it."<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, various other (Polish) authors tackled the so-called "Jewish question" in their publications. The well-known anti-Semitic journalist Jan Gnatowski wrote even before World War I: "The solution to the Jewish question in our country resides in the awareness of the Christians and Catholics as well as the national support that can help to solve it (...) The society can celebrate and employ [the Jew] properly (...) Yet, at the same time, we should construct a wider perspective, and in a more solid manner (...) the only significant and reliable assimilation (...), which involves the unity of spirit, conscience and faith, is assimilation by baptism."<sup>29</sup> The opinion, recommending conversion as the only possibility of complete assimilation, made it more

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<sup>27</sup> W. Fallek, „Zygmunt Bromberg-Bytkowski”, *Nowe Życie. Miesięcznik poświęcony nauce, literaturze i sztuce żydowskiej* 1924, R. I, T. 1, z. 1-3, p. 55.

<sup>28</sup> M. Jarblum, *Polak wyznania mojżeszowego* [A Pole of Jewish faith], Hechawer, Wydawnictwo akademickiej młodzieży syjonistycznej Jardenja, Warszawa 1918, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> J. Gnatowski, *W kwestii żydowskiej* [On the Jewish Question], Warszawa 1909, pp. 85-86.

attractive for the groups seeking full assimilation and breaking the invisible walls of the social ghetto.

Jarblum believed that the Jews rejecting their culture and calling themselves “Poles of Jewish faith”, were in fact already deprived of the connection with the achievements of the Jewish culture, therefore the declaration of religion was for them “an unpleasant tribute paid to the reverence/piety for the past”, which “is not sufficient for the Jews to survive their struggle for existence, as evidenced by the massive numbers of those baptizing.”<sup>30</sup>

Like many Jewish magazines devoted to culture and art, emerging before and after World War I, Tel Awiw opposed “the rejection of culture” as a form of voluntary denationalization, stressing the importance of the earlier demands by I. L. Peretz to modernize Jewish culture and thus ultimately opting for maintaining a certain ethnic distance. Perhaps that is why the article by Szwarc, negating “nationalism in art” bore the disclaimer: “The editors disagree both with the above comments, and with [the above] view of the history of art in general”.<sup>31</sup> But in the new reality which enforced competition with Polish artistic circles, this lack of consent for seeking the ways to preserve identity within the universal culture, might doom the nation to marginalization.

Modern vision of Poland was built in opposition to the former multicultural Republic, and it was argued that Polish national (and religious) homogeneity was a factor guaranteeing the security of the young state. In this context, the representatives of the ethnic minorities rejecting “radical assimilation”<sup>32</sup> and naturally marginalized were forced to put up an unequal battle for survival and for maintaining their relative autonomy.

The Yung-yidish group, constituted at the difficult time of the birth of independence, existed on the Polish nationalist modern art scene partly as its antinomy. The artists drew their inspiration and motifs from Jewish tradition and folklore, confronting their own visions of national art (i.e. art in the Jewish Diaspora) with the current concepts of Polish art. Interestingly, the strategy of seeking national legitimacy in tradition, adopted by the leftist artists of Yung-yidish, coincided with the activities of the right-wing circles affecting the official direction of development of Polish art. However, the right-wingers rejected cosmopolitanism, believing in the power of what was native and indigenous, original and free of foreign accretions, while the work of Szwarc and his friends complies with the tendencies of Western art. Nevertheless, for the irrational

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30 M. Jarblum, *Polak*...p. 20.

31 M. Szwarc, *Sztuka*... p. 185.

32 This concept appears in the work by Todd Endelman in relation to the Jews who chose to convert. The aim of radical assimilation was to hide their origin or erase it completely; See: T. Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish fold. Radical Conversion and Assimilation in Modern History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2015.



world of Hasidic legends and abstract ornamentation, mysticism and spirituality, which make up the elusive "Jewish expressionism" to be able to exist in the minds of non-Jewish audience, it was necessary, besides using modern forms, to introduce elements of new iconography. Piotr Piotrowski wrote: "Christian themes began to function here as an exposition of universal values associated with the ideology of 'the new man', the spiritual rebirth of humanity (...) Christianity was probably intellectually appealing to progressive Jewish artists, as especially on the visual level it could be combined with Expressionist, or more broadly modernist influences, which legitimized artistic 'progressivism' as a manifestation of modern European culture."<sup>33</sup> In the iconography of the Yung-yidish group, Christian themes functioned in addition to the motifs taken from other religions. The artists painted Buddha or Lao Tze alongside Christ and the Baal Shem Tov, turning toward religious syncretism characteristic of modernity. One cannot forget, however, that the choice of a particular theme (this concerns mainly the figure of Christ) might have been a reaction to the news of pogroms and anti-Semitic outbreaks. The artists of Yung-yidish, like other artists associated with the modernist movement, perceived Christ, leaving aside his nationality, as a "universal man" – a bond between two different religions.

### **In search of identity – reclaiming Jesus**

Since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of the Haskalah, part of the European Jews, especially those associated with metropolitan environments that veered toward assimilation, redefined their social position, and had to answer the question of how to define Jewishness, how to be both a Jew and a European: "One of the significant ways in which modernizing Jews attempted to describe a place for Jews and Judaism in the modern world was reclaiming Jesus as a Jew. Their new approach to Jesus transformed him from a figure who had been associated with Jewish marginalization and oppression in European Christian society into a vehicle for their self-transformation and integration into that very society".<sup>34</sup>

Among the researchers (Jewish and Christian alike), increased interest in the life and work of Jesus was observed since the end of the Age of Enlightenment. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the new methods of historical research

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33 P. Piotrowski, *Od nacjonalizacji do socjalizacji polskiego modernizmu* [From nationalization to socialization of Polish Modernism], 1913-1950, „Artium questiones” XV, ed. P. Piotrowski, W. Suchocki, Wydawnictwo UAM, Poznań 2004, p. 117-118.

34 M. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi. Reclaiming Jesus and Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2007, p. 14.

and above all, achievements of archeology, Christ ceased to be seen only in the transcendent dimension, but was rather perceived as embedded in a concrete historical and geographical context, so he became a real hero living in ancient Palestine.

Even Moses Mendelssohn<sup>35</sup> recognized Jesus as an authentic figure. As an ardent advocate of the idea of assimilation, he did not discredit Christianity, treating it as a religion close to Judaism. Although Mendelssohn's views were based on his thorough knowledge of the Jewish tradition, they did not differ from the theses contained in the book by the Christian writer Herman Reimarus.<sup>36</sup> In the work published by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Junger* (1778), Reimarus attempted to provide an accurate representation of Christ's life. Explaining his actions rationally, he denied they were unusual or miraculous. Thus he deprived Jesus of his divinity, and presented him in his historical context as an ordinary man, a God-fearing Jew faithful to the religion of his fathers. Another Christian scholar David Friedrich Strauss<sup>37</sup> radically rejected the New Testament in his book entitled *Das Leben Jesu. Kritisch bearbeitet* (1835), as a source of myths, stressing the need for the identification of Christ with the people and the Judaic tradition.

A significant reevaluation of Jesus was made by two researchers: Heinrich Graetz<sup>38</sup> and Abraham Geiger<sup>39</sup> in their fundamental books: *Das Judentum Geschichte und Seine* (1864) (Geiger) and *Geschichte der Juden von den Zeiten ältesten bis auf die Gegenwart* (1853-1875) (Graetz). Both authors depreciated the New Testament as a reliable source of knowledge about the time of Christ. Jesus himself was for them a real character, the successor of the prophets. Graetz considered him to be an Essene and Geiger called him a Pharisee.<sup>40</sup> Geiger and Graetz never questioned his identity but only his participation in the creation of a new religion - Christianity, thus situating him more in the context of Jewish tradition than Christianity.<sup>41</sup>

35 Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), Jewish German philosopher, writer, precursor of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) movement in Europe.

36 Herman Reimarus (1694-1768), German writer and philosopher.

37 David Friedrich Strauss (1808 - 1874), German theologian, writer and philosopher.

38 Heinrich Graetz (b. Tzvi Hirsh Graetz) (1817-1891), German historian of Jewish origin.

39 Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) - a rabbi in Wiesbaden, Wroclaw, Frankfurt am Main, co-founder of Reformed Judaism.

40 D.A. Hagner, *The Jewish reclamation of Jesus. An analysis & critique of the modern Jewish study of Jesus*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon 1997, pp. 62,63.

41 See. M. Hoffman, "The Quest for the Jewish Jesus" in: *From Rebel to Rabbi. Reclaiming Jesus and Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2007, pp.13-60; Z. Amishai Maisels, "Origins of the Jewish Jesus" in: *Complex Identities. Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, ed. M. Baigell, M. Heyd, Rutgers State University, NJ, 2001, pp. 51-79.

The books by Graetz and Geiger had a significant and profound influence on the subsequent generations of Jews, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>42</sup> There, the process of modernization and assimilation proceeded with some delay, hampered by internal and external factors (orthodox communities and pogroms).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the adherents of the reformed liberal Judaism tended to see Christ as "someone who understood the spirit of Judaism, putting at the center of his attention the prophetic and moral aspects of the faith, while the law and rituals, in his view, were something of secondary importance".<sup>43</sup> This image of Christ met with sharp criticism in both Orthodox and Zionist circles, though in the case of the latter group, it was not so obvious. It is worth recalling the famous dispute sparked by Yosef Chaim Brenner in the beginning of the 1910s<sup>44</sup> and his article written in reaction to an article by Ahad ha-Am.<sup>45</sup> Brenner's text, published in 1910, initiated several years of controversy, whose subject was not only the positive perception of Christianity, but also the freedom of choice and freedom of speech.<sup>46</sup> The echoes of the debate fought in the Jewish press reached the farthest corners of Europe, raising the temperature of the disputes concerning assimilation, apostasy and Christianity.

Both Ahad ha-Am and Brenner were supporters of the Zionist ideology; the former represented the older, conservative generation, and the latter the radical, decidedly secular one. In 1910 Ahad ha-Am published an article commenting on the book by Claude Goldsmid Montefiore *Some Elements in the Religious Teaching of Jesus According to the Synoptic Gospels* (1910). Montefiore, an opponent of Zionism and co-founder of the so-called anglo-liberal Judaism saw himself as a liberal Jew positioned between Orthodoxy and Christianity.<sup>47</sup> This attitude was unacceptable to Ahad ha-Am, who perceived the views propagated by Montefiore as a "poor excuse for a far-reaching assimilation and a way to win the favor of non-Jews".<sup>48</sup> Ahad ha-Am

42 M. Hoffman, *The Quest for...* p. 60.

43 G. Kouts „Jezus i chrześcijaństwo w prasie hebrajskiej i żydowskiej na początku XX wieku. Casus Brennera” [Jesus and Christianity in Hebrew and Jewish press at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The case of Brenner] in: *Jezus i chrześcijaństwo w źródłach rabinicznych: perspektywa historyczna, społeczna, religijna i dialogowa* [Jesus and Christians in rabbinical sources: historical, social, religious and dialogic perspective], ed. K. Pilarczyk, A. Mrozek, Publishing Roman, Kraków 2012, p. 323.

44 Yosef Chaim Brenner (1881-1921) - Russian-born Jewish writer, one of the creators of modern Hebrew literature.

45 Ahad ha-Am (Asher Ginzberg) (1856-1927) - Jewish writer coming from Russia, and Zionist activist.

46 It relates to the article published by Brenner under the pseudonym Haver in *Ha-Poel Ha Cair* dated 24 Nov. 1910.

47 D.A. Hagner, *The Jewish reclamation...* p. 29.

48 G. Kouts, *Jezus i chrześcijaństwo...* p. 328.

saw the unexpected "flirt" with Christianity as getting out of control, a threat to Jewish identity, increasingly blurring it and leaning dangerously toward apostasy and conversion. In response to the article of Ahad ha-Am, Brenner criticized the "obsession of apostasy,"<sup>49</sup> rejecting religion as an essential factor in determining identity. According to Brenner, Jews may or may not need to seek spiritual support in religion (any religion). Brenner's opponents accused him of promoting Christianity, but it is worth noting that Brenner, an advocate of the concept of secular state, definitely distanced himself from all religions and presented Jesus with moderate enthusiasm.<sup>50</sup>

The discussions sparked by the so-called Brenner case revealed problems with self-identification and a deep sense of spiritual void that the Jewish community had to face in confrontation with modernity. The dilemmas of identity were also reflected in literature, poetry and the iconography of the visual arts.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jesus and Christological themes became an attractive subject used by such Jewish artists as Mark Antokolski (1843-1902), Maurycy Gottlieb (1856-1879), Samuel Hirszenberg (1865-1908), William Wachtel (1875-1952) and Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874-1925).<sup>51</sup> In the sculptures and paintings created in response to the pogroms, "Jewish Christ" – through his own experience of pain – symbolizes the suffering of his people and becomes the archetype of the persecuted Jew.<sup>52</sup> In 1912 Mark Chagall (1887-1985) painted the first of his numerous crucifixions (*Golgotha*, Museum of Modern Art, NY). The motif of crucified Christ returns several times in the artist's later works. In Chagall's paintings, Jesus is a Jewish martyr giving thought to the Jewish issues, surrounded by Jewish mothers with children, fleeing with terror from the pogrom,<sup>53</sup> which in time becomes more universal.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid p. 329.

<sup>50</sup> Issucher Szwarz maintained close contacts with the Zionist leaders. The concept of Achad ha-Am, whom he knew well, must have been close to him. Agata Barabash was from Odessa, the center of moderately secular Zionism; she was Issucher's daughter-in-law, the daughter of the banker Shmuel Barabash, an activist of Hovevei Zion. The marriage was arranged by Nachum Sokolow and M. Spektor of Warsaw, and the young people met for the first time during the eleventh Zionist Congress in Vienna. See: *Księga Pamięci Zgierz* [Book of Remembrance of Zgierz], ed. J. Jacobs, Society for the Protection of the Culture of Zgierz, Zgierz, 2009, p. 328.

<sup>51</sup> On the presence of the Christological themes in the works of Jewish artists from Poland, see A. Tanikowski, "Jezus i artyści żydowscy" [Jesus and Jewish artists], in: *Czerpiąc z korzenia szlachetnej oliwki. Dzień Judaizmu w Poznaniu 2004-2007* [Drawing from the root of the noble. Day of Judaism in Poznan 2004-2007] Theological series No. 7, ed. J. Stranz, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznan, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Z. Amishai Maisels, "Origins of the Jewish Jesus" in: *Complex Identities. Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, ed. M. Baigell, M. Heyd, Rutgers State University, NJ, 2001, pp. 51-79.

<sup>53</sup> Z. Amishai-Meisels, "Chagall's White Crucifixion", *The Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 1991, vol. 17 no. 2, p. 143.

Christ nailed to the cross was also a common theme in the work of Marek Szwarc. The first known version of his *Crucifixion* from 1917 probably did not yet have a spiritual connection with the artist's conversion. His work on this subject could have been inspired by Chagall's painting mentioned above, or by the works of the German Expressionists. The researchers studying the works of the Yung-yidish group also point to Szwarc's artistic connections with the Poznań group "Bunt", whose members willingly committed themselves to religious themes, inspired by the symbolism of Young Poland, folk art, and their fascination with medieval mysticism.<sup>54</sup>

In the *Crucifixions* by Szwarc (1917 and 1919),<sup>55</sup> Christ is close to the fantasies of Dürer (1471-1528), Jacob Binck (1485-1568/9), and Wolf Huber (1485-1553). The model for the artist might have also been the lithographs of Gustave Doré (1832-1883), which Szwarc probably saw during his stay in France. Vivid contrasts of black and white highlight the schematicism and simplification of forms – flat, sometimes bordering on abstraction. He achieved dynamic composition by using oblique, strongly accented lines, enhancing the impression of movement, which associates the work of the artist from Zgierz with the German Expressionists.

In later years, Szwarc repeatedly made Christ the protagonist of his works (*Stroke of the Lance* 1928, *Entombment* 1935, *Descent from the Cross* 1939, *Crucifixion* 1950, etc.) but never attained such level of drama and expression.

In 1920, shortly after his marriage to Guina Pinkus, Szwarc converted to Catholicism. In her autobiographical novel *Le Choix*, Guina described this as a pragmatic move, which was eventually perceived as a sign by both of them. Living at the time in Puszczykowo near Poznań, and not wanting to arouse sensation among the local residents, Szwarc declared himself in the register of residents as being of Roman Catholic faith; they later got the acts of baptism by conversion. The godparents [witnesses] at the conversion were the painter and graphic artist Władysław Skotarek and his wife Janina Przybylska, both associated with the Poznań "Bunt". It seems that this act was not yet of great importance, though it may have resulted from Szwarc's subconscious inclination to mysticism, which is revealed in his memoirs.<sup>56</sup> After he moved to Paris in 1920, this inclination developed into a lasting fascination with

<sup>54</sup> Szwarc's *Crucifixion* can be contrasted with the linocut titled *Cross* (1918) by George Hulewicz, but it should be remembered that Szwarc created the first version of the work probably earlier than the work of the artist from Poznań.

<sup>55</sup> It is worth noting that in the spring of 1919, when the journal *Jung Idish* published the second version of the *Crucifixion*, and in November of the same year when Tel Awiw published the article "Art and the Jews", Szwarc had not been baptized yet.

<sup>56</sup> M. Szwarc, *Memoire entre deux mondes*, Ressouvenance, Villers-Cotterêts 2010.

Christianity. His cousin recalled years later: "Marek had a revelation and became an ardent Catholic (...) He had gone mad, I thought (...) here, in Montparnasse, 'that wonderful legend' captured him completely. He walked every day at five in the morning to a Mass at the Norte Dame cathedral. (...) How is this possible? The son of Schwartz, believing in and praying to Jehovah, (...) has a revelation in Lourdes in 1924? And with the dedication of the first Christians wants to follow in the footsteps of the Lord?"<sup>57</sup>

Szwarc's private notes are extremely interesting and we can treat them as a personal statement or rather as a statement of faith or a message. They can be found on the pages of a little book from the artist's library, titled *Zwolf Blatt aus Dürers Kleiner Passion* with the text by Rudolf Schulze and the illustrations showing the so-called Small Passion by Albrecht Dürer. The empty pages separating the individual figures bear Szwarc's notes in pencil, repeatedly crossed out and corrected. Their content is primarily his pondering on Christ and the Jews. The notes end with the word "Amen" and the signatures of the artist and his wife with the dates 1923-1924-1934.

For Szwarc, Christianity was a folly, the consequence of the incarnation and kenosis of Christ – the first madman who instilled in people an element of divinity, commanding them (against their animal nature) to long for divine perfection. He wrote: "The only task of Humanity – created in the likeness of the Creator – is to return to where it came from. From God we came and to God we must return."<sup>58</sup> The madness of Christ, as a burden for humanity, has come down to those who succumbed to him and believed in him, therefore Szwarc – being a convert – considered himself mad. It is worth noting those thoughts of the artist who compared himself with Jesus, declaring in his prayer: "Give me strength to prevail in this one and only Truth, and God, take this ordeal in the name of my people and make the moment approach when they get to know you."<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to other Jewish writers and thinkers, Marek Szwarc saw Jesus not only as a Jewish prophet or a symbol of persecution. The artist, recalling his history and emphasizing that he was born in the small land of Judea, recognizes Christ as the Savior – the Messiah.

Despite his conversion and his deep religious commitment, Szwarc accepts his Jewish identity (which, in his opinion, connects him with Jesus), saying: "All the yearnings of the Jewish people had been preparing his coming but we

<sup>57</sup> I. Czajka Stachowicz, *Dubo...Dubon...Dubonnet*, AB Publishing, Warszawa 2012. p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> Marek Szwarc's Manuscript in: *Zwolf Blatt aus Durers Kleiner Passion*, Leipzig, Private Archive of Dominique Torrès, Paris.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

did not recognize him" [...] twenty centuries after the violation brought upon the unblemished Son of God, our nation is still awaiting him."<sup>60</sup>

Szwarc wrote his "statement of faith" as a handwritten comment on Dürer's graphic cycle. His choice could not have been accidental. It was in the Gothic and Renaissance art – especially in the graphic works, that the artists associated with Expressionism discovered numerous inspirations, treating it as a source of pure aesthetic experience.

On the occasion of Szwarc's exhibition at the Polonia Hotel in Warsaw, the critic Mieczysław Wallis wrote: "Today's artist tries to create art that would not be <the art of the individual> but <the art of the community> (...) such was the art of the Middle Ages – the art of the general public, expressing what was felt and thought by everyone."<sup>61</sup>

In his *Small Passion*, Dürer portrayed sin and redemption in the form of a theological treatise, but he focused mainly on the sufferings of the Savior, applying a new idea of space and skillfully using perspective. The scenes shown by the artist influenced the psyche of the viewers much more strongly than text. It becomes clear that for Dürer the presentation of Christ became the key task of art, and his religious feelings developed to the fullest artistic expression.

It seems that Szwarc pursued a similar goal when he created his works depicting Christological themes. Like medieval artists, he favoured the scenes of the Passion as those which present the essence of humanity most comprehensively. The fervent religiosity, anthropocentrism and humanism characteristic of his art reflect the views of Jacques Maritain, a French philosopher whom Marek Szwarc met in the early 1920s.

### **Marek Szwarc and "The Prophet of Meudon"**

In the second decade of the twentieth century, the *salon* of Jacques and Raissa Maritain in Meudon near Paris became an important meeting place for artists, writers and intellectuals. This group included many Jews from Eastern Europe, baptized or tending toward conversion. The Maritains played an important role in their religious reorientation, highlighting the bond between Judaism and Christianity. An important aspect of Jacques Maritain's concept was the conviction that every person seeking God is a Christian, which includes the followers of another religion. The philosopher believed that the truth which is the essence of Catholicism permeates equally into all religions and even atheist worldviews. Such ideas opened the way to Christian civilization for the Jews,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Sztuki plastyczne. Wystawa Marka Szwarca (Polski Klub Artystyczny (Hotel Polonia) 12-21 listopada 1923 r., „Robotnik” 1923 (dated 18.11.1923).*

offering both them and the Catholics an “alibi” allowing them to forget their religious differences. Maritain’s anthropocentric philosophy placed man in the center of intellectual and artistic reflection, as an individual endowed with free will, whose task is to change the world for the better. What drew Szwarc to Maritain’s concept was its universality and the importance the philosopher paid to love, human dignity and personal choices, i.e. the values standing in opposition to the emerging totalitarian ideology. At the same time, according to Maritain, Szwarc would be able to change his faith without abandoning his Jewish identity – realizing his desire “to be a Jew of the Catholic Faith because I loved Christ the Lord.”<sup>62</sup> This duality of religion and identity was reflected in Szwarc’s works, in which Jewish and Christian themes are intertwined.

In the 1930s, Szwarc’s conversion ceased to be a secret. Its disclosure led to the break of the relations with his family in Zgierz and the ostracism of the Jewish part of the artistic community. Therefore, his works on the religious themes created in the 1930s – devoid of Hasidic austerity and exaltation – seem less spiritual, and more balanced and thoughtful. They lack the expression and emotions characteristic of his earlier works.

## Conclusion

Marek Szwarc, brought up in the spirit of Zionism, initially co-founded the secular culture based on non-religious identity, without abandoning his Jewishness. However, war, civilizational changes and the crisis of traditional values changed his attitude to religion. This change was reflected in the works created for the expressionist group Yung-yidish. Both Szwarc and the other artists in the group enriched Jewish iconography with Christian motifs. Such manifestations of religious syncretism were part of the artistic strategy aiming to place Jewish art in the wider context of the international artistic community. The fascination with Christ as a symbol of the “universal man” led Szwarc to religious reorientation, which deepened under the influence of Jacques and Raissa Maritain. His acquaintance with the Maritains opened up new prospects for his art, at the same time subjecting him to marginalization in his own environment. Jacques Maritain’s integral humanism, which envisaged reconciliation and coexistence of individuals representing different religious and intellectual traditions, clashed with the totalitarianisms growing in strength at the time, and was as utopian as the belief in the power of assimilation held by the enlightened Jewish communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>62</sup> Cit. in the diary of his wife: Guina Szwarc, Manuscript of *Memoirs*, in the private archive of Dominique Torrès, Paris.



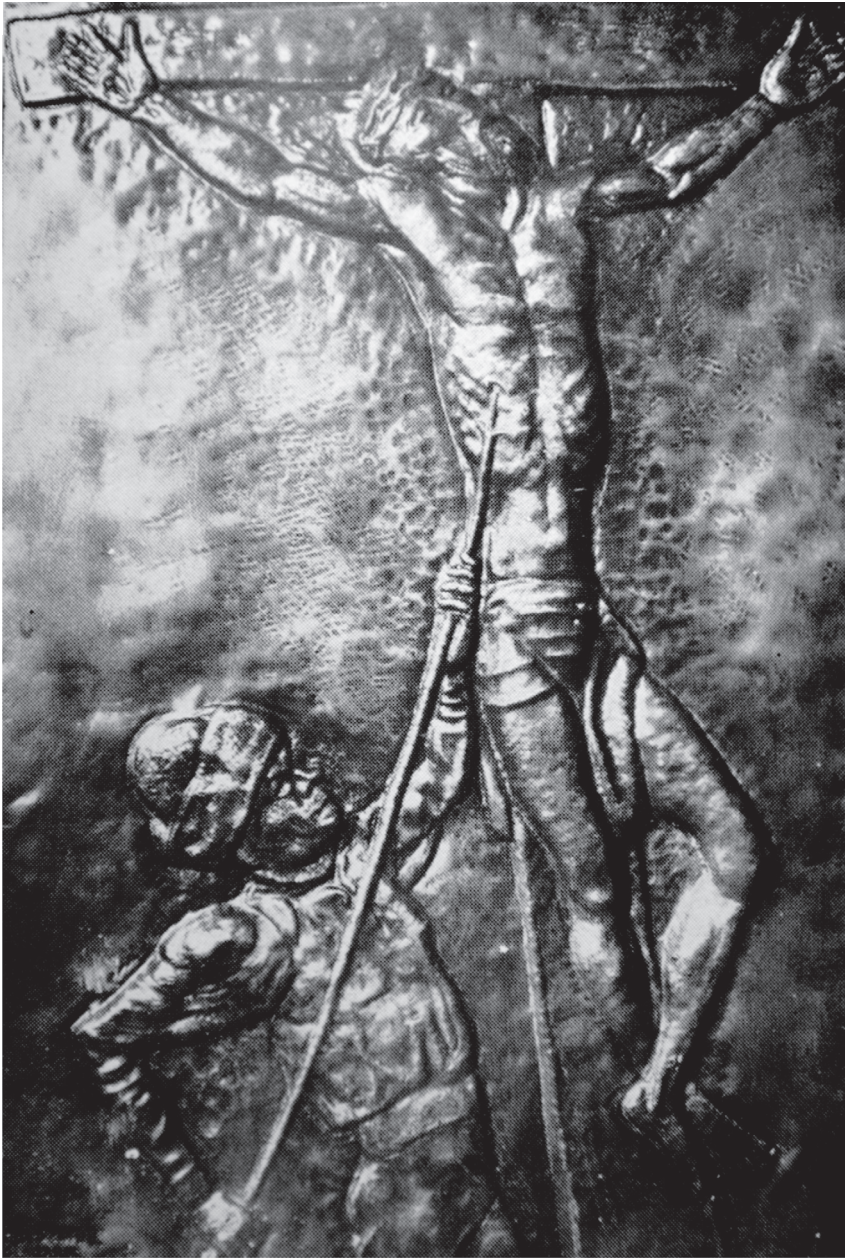
For most of the assimilated Jews a conversion was an alternative to Judaism - increasingly alien to them - or total secularization, and frequently was the only ticket to a career and an improvement of their social status. In this context, the case of Marek Szwarc seems to be exceptional. The artist did not see his religious u-turn as a means of radical assimilation, considering it only as an interim step in his religious development and self-improvement.



1. Marek Szwarc 1917/1918, Archive of Dominique Torrès, Paris. Courtesy of Dominique Torrès



2. M. Szwarc, *Crucifixion* 1917, Collection of Dominique Torrès, Courtesy of Dominique Torrès



3. M. Szwarc, *Stroke of the Lance*, 1928 Illustration from: L. Vauxelles, Marek Szwarc, La Triangle, Paris 1932



4. M. Szwarc, *Sainte Veronique*, 1929, Illustration from: L. Vauxelles, Marek Szwarc, *La Triangle*, Paris 1932



5. M. Szwarc, *Descent from the Cross* b. 1924, Illustration from *Nowa Panorama*, 1924



6. M. Szwarc, *Entombment*, c.1935, Archive of Dominique Torrès, Paris. Courtesy of Dominique Torrès

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## **W POSZUKIWANIU DUCHOWOŚCI. RELIGIJNY ZWROT CZY RADYKALNA ASYMILACJA? PRZYPADEK MARKA SZWARCA. (streszczenie)**

Zwrot religijny stanowił dla większości asymilujących się Żydów alternatywę wobec coraz bardziej obcego im judaizmu i całkowitej laicyzacji. Był przepustką do kariery i polepszenia społecznego statusu. Tylko dla nielicznych stanowił głęboko religijne doświadczenie, które uczyniło ich pobożnymi praktykującymi katolikami. Biografia żydowskiego rzeźbiarza Marka Szwarca stanowi interesujący materiał do badań nad przyczynami religijnej reorientacji. Wychowany w duchu syjonizmu artysta, początkowo współtworzył świecką kulturę w oparciu o niereligijną tożsamość. Wojna i kryzys tradycyjnych wartości wpłynęły na zmianę jego stosunku do religii, co ujawniło się w grafikach tworzonych dla grupy Jung Idysz. Obok tematów związanych z żydowską tradycją, pojawiły się wówczas wątki chrześcijańskie. Wprowadzenie chrześcijańskiej ikonografii podyktowane było pragnieniem zaakcentowania uniwersalnych wartości związanych z duchowym odrodzeniem ludzkości. Już wtedy dostrzegał wizualną „atrakcyjność” chrześcijaństwa, która w połączeniu z wpływami ekspresjonistycznymi czy modernistycznymi legitymowała artystyczny progresywizm jako przejaw nowoczesnej kultury europejskiej. Punktem zwrotnym w karierze Szwarca był chrzest, 1 maja 1920r. w Poznaniu. Akt ten okazał się brzemienny w skutki ze względu na stosunki rodzinne, towarzyskie, wpłynął też na tematykę dzieł artysty. W początkach lat 20., po osiedleniu się w Paryżu, Szwarc poznał Jacquesa Maritaina, którego filozofia ukierunkowała jego dalszą twórczość. Niniejszy tekst stanowi próbę analizy okoliczności zwrotu religijnego Szwarca z uwzględnieniem jego biografii, historycznego i społecznego kontekstu, a także wpływu, jaki konwersja wywarła na jego sztukę.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sztuka żydowska, tożsamość, konwersja, Judaizm, Jezus