Ary Zolberg: Beginnings of a biography

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On September 5, 1944, Father Pierre Goossens, the principal of the Institut Notre-Dame de Cureghem, a Catholic high school in Brussels, celebrated mass to mark the city's liberation from the Germans by the British 2nd Army the previous day. But father Goossens also had an announcement to make to the staff and 500 students of the *Institut*: Henri Van den Berghe, who had enrolled in the school's Greek-Latin section a year earlier, was not who he appeared to be–a Catholic Fleming who had commuted from Schepdaal, just outside of Brussels, until January, when he became a boarder. Henri Van den Berghe, Father Goossens said, was really Aristide Zolberg and had been forced to hide "for being a member of the same race as Our Lord Jesus Christ".

After liberation, Aristide moved back in with his mother, who had been in hiding in Brussels, learned that his father, just like close to half of Belgium's Jews, had been deported (and murdered in Auschwitz), and continued–over his mother's objections–attending the Catholic *Institut* as a day student until March 1948. At that point, at the age of 16 and a few months shy of graduation, he departed for the United States, where he would live with Orthodox relatives in Brooklyn while finishing high school. After college at Columbia University, a master's degree from Boston University, and his army service, he went to the University of Chicago to pursue a PhD.

Aristide's wartime experience is remarkable, but it is not unique. Luc Dequeker, an eminent Judaist from the Dutch-language Catholic University of Leuven, puts at 2,000 the number of Jewish children and adolescents in Belgium who survived the war because they had been sheltered by Catholic families or institutions; an unknown number among them, substantial enough to cause some anxiety in Belgium's Jewish community, were baptized during that period, as was Aristide. In fact, while the *Comité de*

Défense des Juifs–the main Jewish resistance organization–reassured its members that the number of known cases of baptized Jewish children was small, it was big enough for some of the CDJ's Zionist members to worry about the children and warn of the danger of conversion.[1]

Aristide was baptized on February 27, 1943, when some hope was still alive that baptized Jews might escape arrest and the deportations that had begun the previous summer. (All such illusions were shattered soon afterwards, on 1 September 1943, when the order went out to deport all Jews in Belgium.) This might explain the remarkable fact that Aristide was baptized under his real name rather than as Henri Van den Berghe, and that his parents' names–Samuel Zolberg and Sabina Fiszhaut–were also entered in the baptism register. But this also suggests that the exercise was more than purely instrumental, more than simply a put-on to escape persecution.

Onderpastoor (curate) Jozef De Bondt, who administered the baptism early one morning, before the 7am mass, without bothering to inform the parish priest, his superior, must have been aware at least of the general circumstances of Aristide's presence in the village, given the obviously Jewish names of his parents and the fact of his baptism at such a late stage. Given that baptism, the most fundamental of the Christian sacraments, is a matter of utmost importance for Catholics, it is difficult to imagine that De Bondt would have undertaken it lightly; he would have either believed that it would save Aristide from a terrible fate that was becoming more certain by the day, or trusted the sincerity of his conversion (or both).

While we cannot know for certain how the two sides involved–a boy of eleven years and the Catholic Church, in this instance represented by Onderpastoor De Bondt–may have felt about it, the adult Ary Zolberg, in his unpublished memoirs on which this piece is based, writes that he wanted to be baptized both because he hoped that Jesus would protect him against the Nazis and because, should they kill him because of his Jewish ancestry, "they would be fooled because, as the good Catholic I intended to become, I was assured of salvation".

It is perhaps indicative of the depth of Aristide's transformation into Henri Van den Berghe that in Schepdaal he excelled in the two subjects that were emblematic for his new identity: catechism and the Dutch language. Having had just three years of Dutch in school in Brussels, Henri came out first in class in his mid-term exam in Schepdaal, and he was also top of class in Catholic religion, after spending just a few months among the Dutch-speaking Catholics of the village. For someone who had been brought up in an urban, secular, Francophone middle-class household of Jewish

[1] This paragraph draws on Luc Dequeker, "Baptism and Conversion of Jews in Belgium, 1939-1945," in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust. Jews, Belgians, Germans*, Berghahn Books, 2000, pp.235-269.

immigrant parents, that was quite a transformation.

Aristide Rodolphe Zolberg was born in Brussels in 1931 to parents who had come from Poland. Even though Samuel Zolberg and Sabina Fiszhaut had arrived just a decade before his birth, they had quite firmly assimilated into Brussels's secular, Francophone middle class. An only child, he grew up in St. Gilles, a (then) respectable neighbourhood of central Brussels; his father ran a luxury handbag manufacturing business. In his memoirs, Zolberg describes his horror when, on the enactment of some of the early anti-Jewish measures in Nazi-occupied Belgium in 1941, he realized that his family would be treated just the same as that of Charles Sonabend, his Jewish classmate at the *Ecole préparatoire à l'Athénée de St. Gilles*–a primary school attached to a high school–who did not attend school on Saturday morning and whose family would go to the synagogue. (Sonabend, who lives in London, was not well enough to be interviewed for this piece. In 1942, he and his older sister, Sabine, were taken by their parents–his father was Belgium's main importer of Swiss watches–to the treacherous safety of Switzerland. The family of four was picked up by Swiss police and deported across the border to German-occupied France. Charles and Sabine survived the war; their parents were killed in Auschwitz. The siblings eventually won an out-of-court settlement with the Swiss government in a landmark case in the late 1990s.)

One of the things that set pre-war Belgium's Jewish community apart from other communities in Western Europe was its composition–the bulk of it was made up of recent immigrants from the east. When the Germans occupied the country, just 6% of its Jews were Belgian nationals.

Polish Jews had been arriving in Antwerp in their thousands on their way to America; but many found opportunities there and stayed, a trend that was accelerated when the US and the Latin American countries began restricting immigration. Even today, Antwerp has one of the most closely-knit and thriving Jewish communities anywhere in Europe, with a high share of Yiddish-speakers. The Jewish community of Brussels tended to be more secular and more integrated into the city's French-speaking middle classes than its counterpart in Antwerp. Whereas Belgium had no more than about 10,000 Jews before World War I, it had five times that number by 1930. On the eve of World War II, around half of Belgium's Jews–who numbered perhaps 60-70,000–were of Polish origin. It would appear that the Jewish population was about evenly divided between Brussels and Antwerp, although some historians believe that the community in Antwerp was considerably larger (about two-thirds of Belgian Jews, with one-third in Brussels). Either way, all but a few thousand of Belgium's Jews lived in Brussels and Antwerp.

Aristide was sent into hiding after an order in the early summer of 1942–just weeks before deportations to "the east" began from an assembly camp in Mechelen/Malines,

at around the same time as trains left from Drancy in France and Westerbork in Holland–forbade Jewish children to study beyond primary school. In his memoirs, Zolberg writes that his parents interpreted this as a sign of the Germans' intention to exclude Jews from society altogether, an astute interpretation even though they had no inkling of the emerging 'final solution'. Through Samuel Zolberg's gentile lawyer, they found a school principal in Schepdaal, in the Flemish countryside surrounding Brussels, who was willing to put Aristide up for a monthly stipend and to pass him off as a distant relative who was eager to learn proper Flemish before going on to high school. (The school principal in 1953 became mayor of Schepdaal, and a central street in the village is today named after him.)

"Terror prevailed even though reality turned out to be unimaginably worse," Ary wrote later of that time.

Aristide's transformation, in the span of less than two years, from a secular, urban French-speaker into a Catholic, rural Dutch-speaker, by way of an essentially other-imposed Jewish identity–recall his horror at being lumped in with the observant Sonabends–is a poignant story of salvation, not of the spiritual kind but of the most basic, existential kind. To think that just three and a half years later, he would begin another transformation–from a French-speaking European into a proper American, by way of Orthodox Brooklyn–adds to its poignancy. But might there be another conclusion to be drawn from the story? Might the Belgian Aristide–and who knows, perhaps the American Ary as well?–have been an outsider to a greater extent than he understood? His parents were assimilated into the Brussels secular middle class of businesspeople and merchants. But when the Nazis came along, their Jewish ancestry suddenly became salient, and they were made even more vulnerable by their immigrant status. It is hard not to see echoes of this early experience in Ary's work as a scholar.

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