



STEPHAN HERTMANS: THE CONVERT

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast in our special series with the Jewish Book Council, and we are going to have the pleasure of a conversation with author Stefan Hertmans. Stefan Hertmans is considered to be one of the outstanding Flemish writers of this generation. He has won or been nominated for most of the literary prizes in the Dutch-speaking world. He's lectured worldwide, including at the Library of Congress, and his work spans genres from essays, novels, plays to poetry, and as we'll learn in our conversation today, historical fiction with a personal vent. In 2016, he wrote *The Convert*, translated into English in 2019, which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in 2020. *The Convert* embeds Hertmans' own voyage of discovery into that of the fictionalized but real story of the 11th century young woman, Vigdis Adelaïs from a prosperous Christian family in France who falls in love with the rabbi's son. Stefan Hertmans, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Stefan Hertmans: Thank you.

JH: Let's start with a brief introduction to Vigdis, who was she and what was so extraordinary about her story.

SH: Well, I start with acknowledging that we do not know who she was. Her name is not given in the only document, which we have as a proof of her life. So when I first held these documents or a copy of the main article on this document, by Norman Golb in my hands, I was in the village of Monieux where she presumably has lived. And there is only a testimony of Joshua Bidea, the 11th Century Village, who writes a sort of recommendation for a young woman coming from a far Christian land in the north and saying that she's in great pains and mourning because her husband has been killed in the synagogue, during the first crusade by the crusaders. My first real question was, when I grew interested in the book, "Where did she come from?" It's almost

an unanswerable question. Where could a Christian well-bred girl of high rank, because we know she was of high breed because her father sent some of the knights of his friends up to Narbonne, which is 900 kilometers further on in the south of France. You must be very wealthy to be able to do that in the 11th century. So we knew all that, she was a Patrician's girl.

SH: It was thanks to a book again by Norman Golb, which I have here on my table, *Jews in Medieval Normandy*, in which he speaks about the discovery of a synagogue or presumably a yeshiva under the Palace of Justice in Rouen. Only in 1976 it has been discovered. Now, I went to Rouen immediately when I had read the book to convince myself whether it would be possible that the girl was from Rouen. It was one of the most important yeshivas at the time for the Ashkenazi. And I can easily imagine that at the time when Sephardim and Ashkenazim were disputing on the topic of polygamy and monogamy as we know, that the great King of Jews of Nabal sent his son to study to one of the most important Ashkenazi, yeshivas in Rouen. It has been for years and years, an important intellectual discussion, what does yeshivas really been. So I grew convinced that the girl could only come from such a place, where in the medieval world could she meet a Jewish boy, studying at a yeshiva.

SH: The students had reasonable freedom to go where they wanted, so I imagine, because in those medieval settings, the cathedral is only 100 yards away from the synagogue very often. They lived in quite a multicultural vicinity, so I imagined that the girl could very well have come from there. The second problem was how to give her an identity, a name, so I started looking for the population and the demographic situation of that time, and to my surprise, some 40% of the people were descendants of the Vikings, or the Normans who had invaded Normandy at the time. So if she was from a wealthy family, Patricians family, and she was Christian, there was a big chance that she was a descendant from the Vikings. So very many of the most wealthy inhabitants of Rouen at that time were of Viking descendants. So I imagine this girl Vigdis to be a girl of Norman, this is just trying to give an identity to a girl who must have been a very strong woman in her days.

SH: I imagine a girl in those days taking the risk to fall in love with a Jewish boy who is studying there in the yeshiva, and then run away for 900 kilometers in the 11th century fast. This is huge, this is really very impressive. So this is why I wanted to give her this identity, which is already in the beginning multicultural, just to say that if you look at France in the 11th century, it was already very multicultural. If we see now all sort of nationalisms in France, in my own country, in Germany and Poland, etcetera. Europe was very multicultural and very open in those days. Now, imagine this girl traveling 900 kilometers, through 11th century France, to meet her father-in-law, the great king of Jews of that time, Richard Todros. They marry over there, and then they have to flee again from the knights of her father, as I said. So, if you see, talking about Vigdis other lives, who do you talk about?

JH: So you've painted a picture of a young woman who took enormous risks and bridged a universe, in one way, of course, but you're also saying that the universes were very close together in a shared society. You have a very evocative sentence to capture the jump that she took. You say that when she falls in love with David Todros, it's as if she's going on a different planet, in a different calendar. You've spoken about the contiguity, the closest of these cultures, but share with us the vast differences of reality and life that people from these different cultures,

in this case, Christian and Jewish, experienced, such that you would categorize them as living on a different planet, in a different calendar.

SH: Well, imagine if she would have fallen in love with a Christian knight, which her parents hoped she would do, she would have married a guy with a sword who was interested in fighting and violence, and masculinity, which is almost what we would call an aggressive macho culture. Now, she falls in love with a guy who can't even kill a pigeon if he wants to. He has to do it according to certain laws. He has to put it into water for a few days, he has to put salt into it. This is completely different. A guy who is interested in philology and words, and literature, and texts. So this is a huge cultural jump for this girl, and we can only try to imagine what it must have been for her. Now, what is for me one of the most important passages in the book is the moment when traveling and she's desperate, and she doesn't know, when she's afraid because they know that some knights of her father are following her and that she will end up for the rest of her life in a monastery, if she's not burned at the stake. Now, at certain moments, she must have been very desperate. But then I thought to myself, "What is to be a convert?" If you have always believed in your youth in one God, the Christian God, and all of a sudden, your future husband says, "Now you have to believe in Adonai, in the Lord, in Yahweh," whose name she can't even pronounce. The new God she has to believe in, there is no Mother of God, there is no Jesus Child, there is nothing.

SH: There is only this direct link with the theological reality of a god over there, or a theological metaphysical presence. So, it must have been for her, at certain moments, as if God was leaving her. And I always wondered, because of course, I'm a modern human being, hasn't that been the moment of atheism in the girl, which she even couldn't cope with. And she thought, if you could change from one god to another, is there a God? We do not know. She had no vocabulary for all of this. She could not say, as we can, we all Freudian siblings, we can say, "I'm frustrated, I'm traumatized." None of that. Whom did she pray to, can you say that she chose it out of religious or metaphysical conviction? No, it was out of love. That's why the book in French is called "Le Coeur Converti. The Converted Heart." Which is also a very interesting aspect of the book. She converted out of passion. But what was the identity of somebody converting out of passion to a new world, a new religion, in which everything was different? Every cultural aspect.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, Sign Up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

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JH: It's of note that there's also the one-way directionality of conversion in the Middle Ages that we usually assume that either by duress or by convenience, that if anyone would convert, it would be from Judaism to Christianity. Very powerful streams and cross-currents of what you're calling the diversity and the cultural pluralism in Europe. It's an incredible tapestry, and you've captured it with lyric and human beauty. And we have to wonder, what drew her to the Middle East to Cairo and to Jerusalem?

SH: Of course, we have no idea why she went to Cairo. Apparently, her document was thrown into the Genizah. I've seen it, and I must say I was very much moved by entering this synagogue. Just 200 yards to the other side, there's Abu Serga church, where Christ and His parents came on their flight to Egypt. So, it's very sacred ground, it's very impressive, and there to see that on the steps above the synagogue, that at the end, in the wall, there is, of course, this hole, this opening, the Genizah, through which documents have been thrown. If I'm right, normally, rabbi, after, let's say, a century or two centuries, bury every scrap of paper they still find, if it's not eaten by the rats or the serpents.

SH: Only the documents which have to be saved are documents on which the holy letters of Yahweh occur, because you cannot spoil or tear a document on which there are the holy letters with the name of God, of course. So this means that even bureaucratic documents were thrown in, there have even documents been found who probably date from before the destruction of the temple in '66. This is the most important find ever concerning Jewish culture in the first 10 or 11 centuries of our civilization. So this document of the girl was also there. Maybe the document of a second marriage might have been there and has been eaten by the rats, we do not know. When I was there, you know that the Genizah, which is at a store, that the opening of the Genizah, has also two small doors on the ground. And the second time I was there, the doors were open. There was only some tools and some cement and some bricks in it. It was empty because everything is in Cambridge now.

SH: Going further into your question of why she went to Cairo. I guess she was on her way to Jerusalem. Yerushalayim, where she hoped to find her children back, who had been taken away by the Crusaders. So she's really a Jewish mother in search of her children. She had a third child, the document speaks of, which was only new born at her breast. I let her lose this child because there was no talk of this child anymore in the second document, which speaks of the episode in which she's put at the stake apparently in Najera. If it's the same woman, we do not know. It speaks of a woman, who has lost her children in a pogrom, who were also called Jacob and Iusta. But, okay, there she is in Cairo, and we do not know why.

JH: I'd like to draw you out a little bit about the personality of Norman Golb. He was the scholar who actually discovered this letter of recommendation from a Rabbi named Joshua Obadiah or Obadiah, which describes in very, very outlined terms the story of our heroine and indeed the book, *The Convert*. And he was my professor and my doctoral advisor from the University of Chicago. He recently died, leaving behind a rich scholarly legacy. And so in his honor and his memory, I would like to ask you to tell us his role in this and in particular, your interaction with him.

SH: Well, it was, for me, a great honor and almost a dream to get into contact with him. Now, what was of course, for Professor Golb astonishing, is that some Belgian writer somewhere living in Monieux, where he as a young servant had been in December '66 or December '67. In a landscape, I'm sorry, for somebody living in America, which must have looked like a landscape from *The Hobbit*, it's still... I live in the village four or five months a year. It's almost medieval-ish to see it, still. There's this huge rock, there's this village like a bird's nest, there's the life of some 50-60 people in winter, burning oak, eating what they have in their fridge, shooting if they can something in the woods. So you can feel it in my book, I'm very much in love with this life there, with this purity of life. And I imagined how must it have been for the good Norman Golb to come there twice. He was even there a third time in the '70s, but then he grew ill and he didn't go further than Carpentras. But I have a photo from people in the village where he is sitting with his children in front of the house I bought later, which is crazy.

JH: Wonderful.

SH: In talking with Norman Golb and corresponding, I saw this was a man who felt anyway... Well, let's say not always very friendly, and honestly treated by colleagues because he was into this polemic about the Dead Sea Scrolls as you know.

JH: Yes. It bares pointing out that one of the great aspects of Norman Golb's scholarly legacy is that he was a world authority on both the Dead Sea Scrolls, which come from the turn of the era, of the Christian era, and medieval Europe a thousand years later. He had two fields of specialization.

SH: Absolutely.

JH: With his Dead Sea Scrolls thesis being very, very controversial.

SH: But he was obvious very courageous, and he's always been very friendly, and of help. Now, I must say, to me as well, it was very astonishing that he was specialized in the question of the yeshiva in Rouen. And he was the one who almost started his international career with the document of Monieux, for which he has very good arguments. So when I started roaming in the rocks above the village, which I describe in the novel, and I found a so-called water pit, a puits d'eau, as the French say, high in the rocks, where never a drop of water can come into, maybe a bit of rain, that's all. And I saw the grand, the ruins of the wall around, which was a huge oval of almost, I guess, 20 yards certainly, or more. And brought 10, 15 yards and even a higher mount, which can have been the women's higher place.

SH: I was convinced that I found back the ruins of the synagogue, and I immediately took a picture of the pits, the water pit. It's just a pit with a granite seat. So I took a picture immediately with my phone, I sent it to Norman Golb, and he answered "Stefan, you have found, maybe one of the first material proofs of Jewish life in one of those small villages." Of course, we know, in Carpentras there's a huge mikvah. It's like a swim pool, swimming pool. But we didn't know anything of the life of the Jewish population there. This was to me a very great moment of pride to be able to show this to Norman Golb, and to receive his approbation, saying, "Stefan, I think

you're right." So this is one of the very many reasons why I'm convinced that we're talking about Monieux, you know about the Monieux, where never in Hegira De Munio they have never found any trace of life of Jews.

JH: Well, Stefan Hertmans, it seems you have an historian's soul, and it's clear that you have derived incredible satisfaction from this passionate journey of discovery. And in that regard, I wanna tell you what a pleasure it is to talk to you about it, to have read your book, and your sharing of that experience with all of us. And indeed our common experience with Norman Golb, who brought this entire story to the light of day through his incredible scholarly research. Thank you very much for the conversation. This has been an absolute pleasure.

SH: Thank you. It was a very great honor for me to talk with you, and to receive, let's say, your respect for my book and from the readers in America. I'm very honored also by the nomination for the Jewish National Book Award. And I have renewed all sort of contacts with Jewish people in Paris, in Belgium, etcetera. So the book is still alive and has really changed my life as well.

JH: I encourage everybody to pick up the book, *The Convert* by Stefan Hertmans, which you can find easily on Amazon and everywhere else. And enjoy this deep dive into history and the remarkable, remarkable story in medieval France.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of *The College Commons* podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts, or at the *College Commons* website, collegetcommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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