

reference to the circumcision.⁵⁶ He took the name Abraham Izakowicz and wandered around until he reached the small town of Ilia, near Wilno, where he was apprehended. He was then examined by secular and religious authorities but refused to return to Catholicism and was therefore sentenced to death by being burned alive, “so that,” as the decree states, “infectious desire [*pestilential fames*] contaminating the faithful in the Catholic kingdom, may not go unpunished according to the rigor of the laws.”⁵⁷ The execution was to be performed outside of town on June 2, 1753. Before burning, Sentimani’s tongue, “which had uttered blasphemies,”⁵⁸ was to be ripped out by the executioner and his ashes were to be shot into the air through a mortar.⁵⁹

Sentimani’s case resembles the *ger zedek* legend. As in the Polish translation of the legend, so here the convert was apprehended in the town of Ilia. Also, in both texts, the tongue of the convert was ripped out, but in the legend this act was accompanied by God’s punishment of those who laughed when this happened. His name, however, is different, as is his social status, and the date of his death, which according to the legend was to take place on Shavuot 1749 (or 1719), not in 1753. In 1749, Shavuot fell on May 23–24, and in 1753, on June 7–8, not on June 2. Still, the timing of Sentimani’s execution was close enough to Shavuot that year to allow for a conflation of the dates of the festival and the execution. Moreover, it actually fell on Saturday, the Shabbat.

The question still remains as to why this case found its way to the Jewish lore but not the other true stories, such as those of Katarzyna Wejglowa and Maryna Dawidowa, which, instead, inspired a negative reaction, like that of Solomon Luria, or have been passed over in silence by contemporaries or later scholars. While the gender of these earlier converts may have played a role, the timing in the second half of the eighteenth century appears to be an important factor as well. In the second half of the eighteenth century, things began to change in Poland among both Christians and Jews. In 1768, on pressure from Russia, Prussia, Denmark, England, and Sweden, Polish Christian law repealed the death penalty for apostasy.⁶⁰ But the legend seems to be more than a reaction to the change in law. It appears to be a response to a number of challenges the Jewish community faced at the time, and polemical elements within that story highlight just that.

56. Kaźmierczyk, *Żydzi Polscy*, 187.

57. Kaźmierczyk, *Żydzi Polscy*, 188.

58. Kaźmierczyk, *Żydzi Polscy*, 188.

59. The cutting of a tongue in case of trials of heretics was not uncommon in premodern Europe; see, for example, the trial of Michael Sattler, an Anabaptist put on trial in 1527. Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 180–83.

60. For laws concerning the non-Catholic Christians promulgated at the 1768 Sejm, see Konarski, *Volamina Legum*, 7:256–74. Article I, § III deals with the repeal of the death penalty and sets expulsion as the punishment for apostasy: “Cum religionem Romanam Catholicam in Polonia dominantem, iuribus Cardinalibus annumeremus, transitum ab Ecclesia Romana ad aliam quamcunque religionem in hoc Poloniae Regno, Magno Ducatu Lit. et in annexis Provinciis criminale delictum declaramus. Qui itaque futuris temporibus transpire ausus fuerit, exul Dominiis Reipublicae esto,” Konarski, *Volamina Legum*, 7:257.