

Ellie R. Schainker. *Confessions of the Shtetl: Converts from Judaism in Imperial Russia, 1817–1906*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 339 pp.
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Ellie Schainker's study aims to change conventional opinion on converted Jews in imperial Russia. The traditional view is embodied in Sholem Aleichem's novel *Tevye the Milkman*, in which Tevye and his wife Golda sit shiva (mourn) for their daughter, who has converted in order to marry the Ukrainian Fedka. Schainker explains, "By asking how converts functioned in Jewish society, I hope to sidestep the emotional, literary rendering of apostates as dead to their Jewish kin, and account for the overwhelming archival evidence of ongoing social, religious, and economic ties between converts and Jews in imperial Russia. In this vein, my work on converts is as much about a minority of radical boundary crossers as it is about the majority of their former, traditionalist coreligionists who tried to defend cultural and communal boundaries in the face of conversion" (10).

Schainker describes unusual individuals who crossed the religious Rubicon. Using rare materials from archives in Russia and the United States, she depicts converts from among the lower classes and rural population. The focus differs from the kind of converts who were the subject of Saul Ginsburg's famous book, *Meshumodim in Russland* (Converted Jews in Russia), published in 1946. In contrast to the social elite—medical doctors, government censors, and professors—Schainker depicts minor missionaries who peddled Christianity, marginal Jews who fell in love with a Christian neighbor or a servant, and the poor who saw distinct financial advantage in conversion, such as access to educational institutions or a permit to live in Russia's capital cities. Schainker also includes "simple" Jews who fell in love with the Christian religion. After converting, she notes, many Jews did not move far from their homes, and some resided close to their parents and family.

Here are some of the protagonists of the book: "In 1855 the Jewish teenager Faiba Nakhim from the village of Smorgona in Vilna Province applied for conversion after having begun preparations himself by learning prayers and articles of faith from Christians with whom he had 'occasional contact.' Malka Kuks, the daughter of a mill leaseholder, ascribed her 1864 conversion to her exposure to Orthodoxy and her acclimation to Orthodox life in her village. Roshka Shmulovna