

“Make It So That You Are”: Łukasz Tischner Talks with Elżbieta Wittlin-Lipton¹

Łukasz Tischner: In a letter to Kazimiera Żuławska dated May 1, 1921, your father wrote: “[C]urrently, I am contemplating being baptized and really joining the Franciscan order after I finish the *Odyssey* and several smaller tasks. I would like to become a preacher. I have a vocation to do this. I feel that I could change something in the world not with the help of books, but with the living word and good, albeit ruthless, deeds. I would preach from mouth to mouth truths that may be unpleasant but are at the same time fruitful and the only truths.” It is well known that his baptism occurred after the war, but was your father really on the verge of joining a religious order?

Elżbieta Wittlin-Lipton: Maybe. I do not know about this.

Ł.T.: So he never talked about this?

E.W.L.: He spoke about religion more in the context of Jewish-Catholic matters.

Ł.T.: How do you understand his fascination with St. Francis?

E.W.L.: This fascination was greater than is generally believed. This was not only a fascination with Francis and with Assisi, to which he frequently traveled. This was also, more broadly, a love of Italian culture, of Giotto, for example.

Ł.T.: Without a doubt, St. Francis’ message – hope for the redemption not only of people, but also of the animal world – was also important. The last line of *Lament barana ofiarnego* (“The Lament of the Sacrificial Ram”) comes

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to mind: “And only one time in the history of this earth/ A holy man called animals his brothers.”

E.W.L.: Yes, certainly. St. Francis was also a writer. He did not begin as a saint, but he went down a long road, beginning with art and culture, leading through participation in wars, and culminating in the surrendering of his goods and establishment of a religious order... My father wanted to be like St. Francis. He really did. I do not know if he believed at the end of his life. He always said that even if our faith is 99 percent certain, there always remains some doubt...

Ł.T.: As he wrote in his famous poem *Trwoga przed śmiercią* (“Fear of Death”): “Make it so that you are...”

E.W.L.: Yes! I think he also believed that Franciscan discipline could have helped him, since he considered himself to be weak. He was not weak, but that was what he thought. He used to say that if he had been caught during the German occupation of Poland, he would have denounced my mother and me within five minutes. For him, St. Francis was a moral force.

Ł.T.: Francis was not only a guardian of the poor, but also a person engaged in politics. He opposed the Crusades and later tried to push for peace between Muslims and Christians, meeting with sultan Al-Kamil...

E.W.L.: Yes!

Ł.T.: Before the war, did your family celebrate any holidays at home? Were they only Christian holidays or Jewish ones as well?

E.W.L.: We only celebrated Christian holidays: Christmas, the Epiphany... I used to go to church with our cook.

Ł.T.: Was your mother religious?

E.W.L.: My grandfather on my mother’s side was not religious... My mother triggered within me a painful, instinctive feeling of guilt, which had its origins in the years when we were all hiding together during the occupation. I was not a good daughter to her. My mother was simultaneously heroically strong and masochistic. My father and I made cruel use of this. We were completely different. She was often incapable of understanding things that seemed totally natural to me. She did not entirely appreciate me, and she had reasons for doing so. I envied her dignity, which was that of a great lady, and her beauty, yet at the same time I could not cope without her and became weaker in her

presence. This is difficult to explain. Up to the present day, this is a beloved secret, a taboo for me. Her religiosity is also a secret for me.

Ł.T.: On various occasions, you have mentioned that your father identified with all the protagonists of *The Salt of the Earth*: Piotr Niewiadomski, Bachmatiuk, and Jellinek... It seems that he portrayed superstitious characters very well and almost emphatically.

E.W.L.: He did believe, for example, in the power of red ribbons. This was a Jewish superstition.

Ł.T.: This superstition, according to which a red ribbon defuses spells cast by witches, is shared by the Carpathian highlanders. The motif of *Hutsul uriczni*, i.e. people casting spells, appears in his correspondence with Terlecki or Grydzewski...

E.W.L.: My father approached this with some humor, but, as in *The Salt of the Earth*, he did solar eclipses as signs. Furthermore, he saw the devil in Munich.

Ł.T.: How should we understand what you have just said?

E.W.L.: After the war, he went there, to the headquarters of Radio Free Europe, and saw someone whom he considered to be the devil on the street. This could have been related to a unique meteorological phenomenon he was especially sensitive to: then, the *foehn* was blowing from the Alps. However, my father also believed that there was something diabolical about Jerzy Kosiński.

Ł.T.: What exactly did he have in mind?

E.W.L.: My father was very sensitive to all, let us say, ambiances that emanated from people. Because we all knew that Kosiński had made up his Holocaust-era agonies (which were sacred to my father) in *The Painted Bird*, my father lost respect for his writing. He considered him to be a compulsive liar, careerist, and effective manipulator. After my father had died, Kosiński was my neighbor. I can honestly say that he was erratic, to say the least, probably as a result of drug addiction. I feel sorry for him, because he had a terrible death and probably suffered.

Ł.T.: Was your father superstitious when it came to, for example, numbers and dates?

E.W.L.: He was, but he approached this with humor.

Ł.T.: I would also like to ask about the circumstances of your father’s baptism. This happened late, when you were a mature person. In one interview, you said that your father had stalled on his baptism because he felt solidarity with the Jews, who during the war had been slated for extermination. Józef Wittlin was baptized in New York on May 23, 1953. Tellingly, he chose the baptismal name Francis.

E.W.L.: He has a close friend of Father Johannes Oesterreicher. Unfortunately, I did not know him well. Oesterreicher was interested in Jewish converts to Christianity. He himself spoke Yiddish and listened to the radio in the language.

Ł.T.: He was one of the architects of the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate*, which laid the foundations for dialogue between Judaism and Christianity...

E.W.L.: Oesterreicher was in touch with the Maritains, who lived in Princeton between 1948 and 1960. When they visited New York, my father would meet them. Edith Stein probably would have become a close figure for my father, also because she was a friend of Roman Ingarden. Ingarden’s and Edith Stein’s correspondence made a great impression on me. She is very interesting to me because she evokes Teresa of Ávila, who also came from a Jewish family.

Ł.T.: If I am correct, St. John of the Cross also came from a family of Jewish converts...

E.W.L.: I did not know that. My father considered St. John of the Cross to be the first modern poet.

Ł.T.: I would be interested to know how your father responded to the Second Vatican Council, especially the document in whose drafting Father Oesterreicher played a role: *Nostra Aetate*.

E.W.L.: He was very interested in the council and believed that it was a momentous event. He believed that it would change the world.

Ł.T.: In one of his notebooks, your father wrote the following beautiful declaration: “I am a Christian because I am a Jew. My Jewishness greatly helps me to understand Christ. At any rate, this is the same substance, and it is no exaggeration to say this. For me, the New Testament is separated from the Old by just one empty page.” How would you describe his attempt at binding together Jewishness with Christianity?

E.W.L.: It was based on a conviction about continuity, on connecting the Old and New Testaments. It was based on sensitivity, maybe even great sensitivity,

to his Jewishness and the resulting self-hatred. When I read about Jelinek in *The Salt of the Earth*, I get goose bumps. This is also my father! When it came to his feelings, he was painfully honest. This characteristic of rejecting Jewish identity is still present among Jews. For example, when I was a child, my mother would say: “Don’t talk like a Jew.” The fact that my father burdened me with life is also related to my Jewish heritage. It just so happens that tomorrow I am traveling to the former camp at Majdanek. He believed it was a miracle that I had survived. He did not talk about himself in such terms, but he did about my mom and me. When my father would come to visit us in Spain, at the beginning he needed to have a half-hour-long talk with me, one that I found very painful. He would say then that he was on a penitential journey and would remind me in very strong terms that I had to feel indebted because I had survived the Holocaust. I always cried then. I would never say anything similar to my child.

Ł.T.: Your father frequently traveled to Assisi, but I think he did to Lourdes as well...

E.W.L.: It would be difficult to call this travel; we simply ended up in Lourdes as we were fleeing Europe during the war. This was the summer of 1940, when we had to return from Nice to Saint-Jean-de-Luz to try to organize a journey across the ocean. That was when we found ourselves in Lourdes. At that time, there was some bishop there who was holding a literary meeting; Franz Werfel also took part in it. Like us, Werfel had fled the Nazis. He said that if he survived, he would write a book about Bernadette Soubirous. And he did just that. My father, meanwhile, said that if we survived, I would be called Bernadette. And that was my confirmation name.

Ł.T.: Your father’s writing leads to the suspicion that he felt a certain religious-moral vocation in his life and perceived his fate in the categories of metaphysical-moral duty.

E.W.L.: Yes, absolutely. When I did something inappropriate, he would say to me: what a nice Catholic girl you are! I suppose that he believed that he himself was far from being an ideal Catholic and projected those frustrations on me. He was a perfectionist!

Ł.T.: His religiosity, however, was marked by constant crises. What did his difficulties with faith consist of? Were they of a moral nature (i.e., opposition to the vision of hell and to the acceptance of evil on earth)?

E.W.L.: These difficulties resulted above all from sensitivity to death and a lack of acceptance of it. He was a writer and poet of death. What is there?

He wanted to believe and to live, although he would frequently say that he would soon kill himself. And he did try to do so. The last time...

Ł.T.: When did the last suicide attempt take place?

E.W.L.: It was shortly before my wedding. He was terribly ashamed of the fact that he could not earn a normal salary, although there was no pressure. My fiancée and I did not dream of any luxury and everything was wonderful. I made my own dress and Jan Lechoń played the piano. However, my father felt terrible. When the symptoms of depression intensified, physicians prescribed him various drugs, including methedrine. At that point, he wanted to jump from a bridge. Fortunately, we were visited by my friend's husband, who was a wonderful doctor. He gave my father a shot, after which he calmed down. When I compare my father with Lechoń, who did commit suicide, I believe that the latter was preparing for suicide, but never said anything. My father, meanwhile, had these bursts of rage and anger when he would yell that he was going to kill himself, but after such fits he would stop. Sometimes he wrote amidst such fury. He once wrote a scathing paraphrase of Whitman that was an angry attack on American culture.

Ł.T.: In other words, the description by Gombrowicz, who said that your father was both kindhearted and demonic, was accurate...

E.W.L.: Yes. My mother used to say that our house was a theater of the absurd. Fortunately, there was also my father's favorite cat, Sadie Carnot, and the common sense of humor that saved us. My mother would say that without humor we would go mad, but unfortunately she ultimately did go mad.

Ł.T.: I found the following entry in your father's unpublished notebooks: "Oversensitive with regards to anything that has something to do with the cross, crucifixion, etc., for example, 'to cross one's path,' to cross, or to crucify." One can find a literary record of this oversensitivity in the *Prologue* to *The Salt of the Earth*. Did you ever witness this oversensitivity? What did it consist of, and how would you explain its origins?

E.W.L.: I think that he grieved over the fact that most people do not grasp the meaning of the cross as the place of Christ's agony and death. For my father, this was not a decorative object but a tool of torture and death similar to most such objects, including the iron collar and the electric chair. My father was repulsed by the death penalty and frequently quoted Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* as well as Camus. This sensitivity to crosses is very clear in the essay *Krzyż* ("The Cross"), which can be found in *Eseje rozproszone* ("Dispersed Essays"), which he wrote after his stay in Arezzo, where he observed Piero della

Francesca’s frescoes. This is also evident in *Lament barana ofiarnego* (“The Lament of the Sacrificial Ram”), which was inspired by Rembrandt’s painting *Sacrifice of Isaac*, which is in Munich in the Alte Pinakothek. When I read this poem, I have before my eyes the bound lamb from Zurbaran’s painting, which is in the Prado.

Ł.T.: Based on what you have said about Assisi, it seems that your father’s religiosity was related to sensitivity to art.

E.W.L.: Yes. For him, art was a bridge to religion, and for me it is as well. When I watch Olivier Messiaen’s opera *Saint François d’Assise*, it is a very spiritually powerful experience.

Ł.T.: Your father’s last poem, *Postscriptum do mojego życia* (“A Postscript to My Life”), comes to mind. In it, a request to God appears: “But You, who I would like to believe exists/ Bring to there where my soul, if I have one, will be/ Your consoler Wolfgang Amadeus.”

E.W.L.: Our contact with God and with faith occurred through art. That was why he loved Italy so much; it was there that he could talk to God. And talk he did.

Ł.T.: I am very much convinced of one particular trait of your father’s religiosity. He looked for God in the mundane, not in intellectual constructs that go beyond everyday life.

E.W.L.: Yes. *The Salt of the Earth* was like the *Odyssey*, except that the main protagonist was not Odysseus but the swineherd Eumaeus. This idea was beautifully developed by Zygmunt Kubiak in his afterword to *The Salt of the Earth*. He called Józef Wittlin the Polish Homericist.

With regards to Mozart, my father believed that his music hides God’s presence. My father was very knowledgeable about music. He needed to experience God through Mozart, because for him Mozart was a tangible gift from the Almighty to him. Another one was the abstraction that was his faith.

I would like to add that my father often talked to Mieczysław Horszowski, who also came from a Jewish family that professed Catholicism.

Ł.T.: To conclude, I would like to ask about the end of your father’s life. This is a time for reevaluating one’s life and for especially intense religious inquiries. Was that the case with your father?

E.W.L.: He died in a hospital. I was not present when he died; my mother accompanied him. He was afraid of death. Shortly before passing, he said that

he was dying for Poland. Then he hallucinated and asked my mother to take a painting of Luther off the wall, one that was not there. He also asked her to straighten out the blanket, because he was fanatical about orderliness. That was the Bachmatiuk in him!

Translated by Filip Mazurczak