

# ISSUES

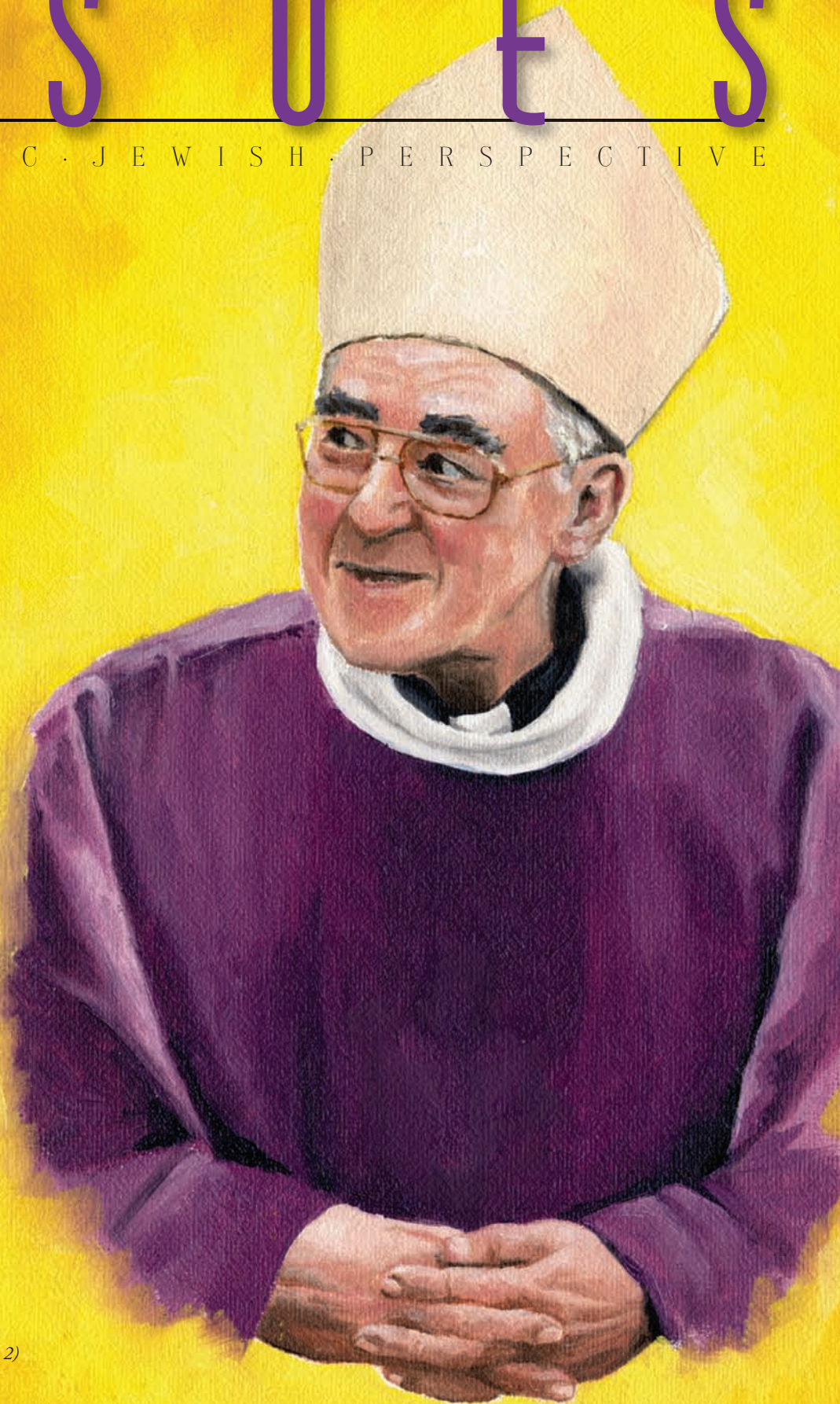
A · M E S S I A N I C · J E W I S H · P E R S P E C T I V E

## Yartzheit for the Cardinal

*by Josh Turnil*

Jean-Marie Lustiger walked nervously up to the dais to preside over his first mass. The church was packed and the silence palpable. Just as the young priest was about to speak, someone from the crowd yelled, “Get the Jews out!” Lustiger’s reply broke the stunned silence, “All right, if the Jews must leave, that means the guy on the cross and his mother behind me will have to go as well!”

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The account may not be reliable; nonetheless, it is the most popular unofficial story about Lustiger in France. Most everyone has heard about the priest who became a cardinal who called himself a Jew. How does the larger Jewish community\* feel about this? How should we feel as individuals about this? How Jewish was Jean-Marie Lustiger, anyway?

The Jewish community had mixed feelings about the cardinal. After his nomination as archbishop, Jewish-Catholic relations in France improved dramatically. Ironically, Lustiger worked tirelessly to bring the church to its knees regarding its treatment of the Jewish people. He was the unrelenting motor behind the church's recognition of the "sins of the past"; he influenced the pope to that end. In 1995 he accompanied a group of French rabbis to hear Catholic authorities apologize for the French church's passivity toward the Vichy government's collaboration with Nazi Germany. He made advances in Jewish-Christian dialogue, transforming it into a less formal, more "shmoozy" discussion. Lustiger communicated something that others before him could not. He never said it, but it showed: he felt comfortable among Jews. At times, the Jewish community seemed to feel pride in the cardinal. It was a sort of "local boy done good." One of our own had become, as he was often called, a "Prince of the Church."

Notwithstanding, the Jewish community wasn't about to nominate him for a "man of the year" award. Isi Leiber, a prolific writer on Jewish affairs, in writing for Israel's newsmagazine, *IsraelInsider*, said this of Lustiger in March 2005:

. . . the most disconcerting aspect of the WJC (World Jewish Congress) relationship with the Catholics is the prominent role accorded to the Cardinal of Paris, Jean Marie Lustiger, who until his recent retirement was regarded as a possible candidate to become the next pope.

Over the past two years, Cardinal Lustiger, a Jew who converted to Catholicism, has become a virtual World Jewish Congress icon. He was a major speaker at Governing Board and Executive meetings and, even more surprisingly, was selected to be the keynote speaker for the WJC Plenary Assembly held earlier this year in Brussels.

There is no doubt that Lustiger is sincerely committed to combating anti-Semitism in the Church and obviously enjoys representing the Church at Jewish and Jewish related activities. The pope is clearly happy to use him in this capacity and even appointed him to be his personal representative at the 60th commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz in Warsaw.

However it is difficult to understand how an international Jewish body headed by an orthodox Jew using a rabbinical mantle, repeatedly invites Cardinal Lustiger to participate at gatherings of international Jewish leaders, ignoring the fact that Cardinal Lustiger is not just an enlightened Catholic prelate opposed to anti-Semitism. He is an apostate, a Jew converted to Catholicism. More than that, Lustiger who speaks Yiddish, continues to describe himself as a Jew, albeit a "fulfilled Jew."<sup>i</sup>

The Jewish community questions continued, "How could he? How could he don the garb of those who preached the Crusades in centuries past, *in Europe*, of all places? Why did he insist, as he often did, that he was a 'Cardinal, a Jew and the son of an immigrant.'"<sup>ii</sup> Why didn't he understand what his friend Elie Wiesel tried to communicate to him: "Where I come from and from where I stand, one cannot be Jew and Christian at the same time. Jesus was Jewish, but those who claim allegiance to him today are not. In no way does this mean

\* When referring to the Jewish community in this article, we generally mean the French Jewish community.

that Jews are better or worse than Christians, but simply that each of us has the right, if not the duty, to be what we are.”<sup>iii</sup> Yet Lustiger respectfully disagreed. He told Wiesel, “I feel Jewish. I refuse to renounce my roots, my Jewishness. How could I betray my mother’s memory? It would be cowardly and humiliating.”<sup>iv</sup>

Born Aaron Lustiger in 1926 in Paris, his parents, Charles and Gisèle, non-practicing Ashkenazi Jews from Poland, had moved there around World War I. Aaron and his sister, Arlette, grew up in the 12th *arrondissement* (borough), the heart of the Jewish community. His family lived on the *Rue Marcadet*, well-known center of the poor Polish-born Jewish community and far from the Sephardic *bessere menschen* (better people). Lustiger in Yiddish means “joyful one,” and he lived up to his name. No childish misdeed was too mischievous, if it could afford a laugh.

Before the cardinal died, one of the most popular jokes in the Paris Jewish community went along these lines: *What is the difference between the chief rabbi and the cardinal of Paris? The cardinal speaks Yiddish.* Indeed, Lustiger bathed in the *mama loshen* (mother tongue). He learned early on, however, that speaking Yiddish and living in the Ashkenazi immigrant district wasn’t all that Jewishness was about. In an interview with the Israeli newspaper, *Yediot Aharonot*, he reflected on this: “As a child, my Jewishness meant being persecuted, historically and personally, from which I have no desire to escape for one instant.”<sup>v</sup>

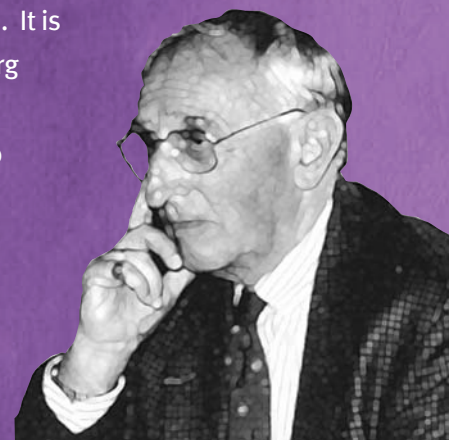
He never did. Lustiger showed intellectual promise early on, and his parents sent him to one of Paris’ most prestigious schools, the Lycée Montaigne. He excelled in literature and languages. But a young Polish Jew stood out and his schoolmates would not let him forget it. They often pummelled him in traditional European custom. In 1937 he visited an anti-Nazi Protestant family in Germany whose son was in the Hitler Youth (all German teenagers were compelled to join). The son, believing Lustiger was a Gentile, showed him his dagger and confided that the

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## ALEXANDRE GLASBERG

Alexandre Glasberg was born to a Jewish family in the Ukraine in 1902. He and his brother, Vila, came to believe in Jesus and emigrated to France in the early 1930s. Alexandre attended seminary and was ordained a priest in 1938. In 1940 he began hiding political refugees from the Nazis. Glasberg also worked with Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), the Jewish organization for the rescue of children, to save refugees from internment camps in France, most of whom were Jews. He personally falsified files to gain the release of hundreds of Jews, many of them children. The Nazis captured his brother, Vila, thinking he was Alexandre. In order to protect his brother, Vila did not deny it. The Nazis arrested, deported and murdered him.

Alexandre evaded the Gestapo. After the war, he helped facilitate the emigration of Holocaust survivors to Mandatory Palestine (and later, to the State of Israel) and mass emigrations of Jews from Iraq, Morocco and Egypt. He died in France in 1981. *Yad Vashem*, The Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, recognized Alexandre and Vila as “Righteous Among the Nations” in 2004. It is likely the Glasberg brothers would have preferred to be identified as Jews and not as “among the nations.”





Courtesy of Heritage Auction House

Above: A painting by Max Jacob—"View of the City"—the city, of course, being Paris and the view, Notre Dame de Paris.

Hitler Youth will kill "all the Jews in Germany during the summer solstice."<sup>vi</sup> But it was also around this time that the young Lustiger came across a Protestant Bible and was inexplicably attracted to it.<sup>vii</sup>

He never lost his sense of humor or his *chutzpah*. During the Nazi occupation of Paris, he met a Gestapo officer on more than one occasion. At one such encounter, the officer was impressed that he answered in German, and asked him suspiciously how he learned such good German. To which the 14-year-old Lustiger replied, putting a little more French accent into his German, "Here, in France, we have very good German teachers!"<sup>viii</sup> Of course, anyone who knows the history of these two countries knows that

the French have never learned or taught the German language well at that age level!

In 1940, in response to the Nazi occupation, his parents sent him and Arlette to live with a Catholic family in Orleans, 80 miles south of Paris. Suzanne Combes, a member of that family, was finishing her doctorate in French literature at the time. Interviewed later in life, she recalled Lustiger asking questions about Christianity. But it is clear in her accounts of the young Lustiger children's education that she was more worried about piano lessons, homework and keeping Aaron from reading comic books than converting him to Christianity!

With the world falling apart around him, Lustiger was

## MAX JACOB

Max Jacob, an important French poet of the early 20th century, was born to Jewish parents in 1876. Also a painter, he lived in extreme poverty. Jacob met Pablo Picasso in 1901. They shared a studio and later lived three doors from each other in Paris.

Jacob had a vision of Jesus in 1909 in a landscape he had painted. He became a Catholic but struggled with homosexuality and heavy drinking. “He fervently believed in his new faith,” said author Sydney Levy, “but it did not affect his personality or his art. . . . Christianity tolerated his presence in its midst with difficulty.”

In 1921 he moved to the small village of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, where he remained until the Gestapo arrested him in February 1944. They took him to a holding camp in Drancy, where he grew gravely ill and died on March 5, 1944.

Gabriel Aghion, who directed a movie about Jacob, holds Jacob’s friends, especially Picasso, responsible for his death. “All of his friends . . . could have saved him, but they didn’t,” Aghion said. “They spent the war drinking champagne.”

“There is no need to do anything,” Picasso said after Jacob’s arrest. “Max is an imp. He does not need us to fly away from his prison.”

searching for meaning in the chaos. His unconformity and inquisitiveness pushed him to ask deep questions about Judaism and Christianity. His separation from the Jewish world caused him to crave contact with other Jews. He found it in one of the most unlikely places: the New Testament. For when he read the New Testament he discovered a familiar Jewish world from which he had been cut off. He found conversations that he had heard before and themes that concern his people—the *Shabbat*, *Brit Milah* (circumcision) and *Kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws). Lustiger found the answers to his probing questions and asked his protectors to have him baptized. For Aaron had discovered, through his readings and his prayers in hiding,

that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

However, Suzanne Combes refused to allow Lustiger to be baptized unless his parents gave express permission. Lustiger remembers this moment as one of the most difficult in his life: “It was an unbearably painful scene when he told his parents. He explained that he was not abandoning being a Jew but discovering its real meaning. His parents did not understand and he suffered greatly from their pain. He took the step only because he felt it was absolutely necessary for his soul.”<sup>ix</sup> Although Lustiger’s parents initially denied his request, shortly thereafter they asked Suzanne and the local priest to baptize both children in an attempt to save them from the coming nightmare. Lustiger kept Aaron as his first name, and added the name Jean-Marie at his baptism in August 1940.

His mother, however, did not escape the horrors of the Holocaust. On February 13, 1943, Gisèle Lustiger died at Auschwitz after having been deported from Drancy, the infamous French detention camp. After the war, Aaron’s cousin, Arno Lustiger, who survived Auschwitz, discovered that an employee of the Lustiger family’s hat and drapery shop denounced Gisèle to the French militia in charge of deportations. The woman had long coveted the Lustiger apartment and took it for herself. Lustiger’s father had left Paris to look for another home for his family, thereby escaping the fate of his wife.<sup>x</sup>

After the war, Lustiger’s father along with the Chief Rabbi of Paris confronted his son about his faith. Together they all visited the bishop in charge of reversing baptisms. Everyone wanted Aaron to recant, claiming he had been baptized only for practical reasons, to escape the Nazis. Aaron vigorously denied that argument and refused to recant.<sup>xi</sup> Why did he refuse? It became increasingly apparent over the years that Lustiger truly believed.

When interviewed about his experience during the war, Lustiger was asked what he remembered most about occupied France. “To see a country collapse, that everything comes crashing down, that those vested with the truth become liars, those

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vested with courage become cowards, those vested with justice become traitors, those entrusted with the public

## EDITH STEIN

Edith Stein, the first Jew to be declared a saint by the Catholic Church, was born in Breslau, Germany, on Yom Kippur, 1891. Her father died when she was two and her mother, a devout Jew, raised her and her six siblings. Stein earned a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Göttingen. In 1921 she read the autobiography of Teresa of Avila, which drew her into a personal relationship with Jesus.

Stein taught, wrote and lectured and was a leading voice in the Catholic Women's Movement in Germany. In 1933, when anti-Semitic laws made it impossible for Stein to continue, she entered the Carmelite Order in Cologne, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

After *Kristallnacht* (pogrom in Nazi Germany, November 9, 1938), the nuns sent Stein to a convent in the Netherlands, where her sister, Rosa, later joined her. When the Nazis began deporting Dutch Jews to the concentration camps, the Catholic Church protested. The Nazis retaliated by ordering the deportation of Jewish converts to Catholicism.



On August 2, 1942, the Gestapo seized Edith and Rosa. As the two left the convent, Edith told her sister, "Come, let us go for our people." They died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz on August 9.

good abandon the people," he recalls. "I saw all of this with my own eyes and it is probably what most traumatized me."<sup>xii</sup> Aaron Jean-Marie Lustiger decided that this would not happen to him. He would not deny the truth or his own convictions.

Those convictions simply stated were that one, he was a Jew, and two, Jesus was the promised one for Israel. What touched him most when he began to read the New Testament was its connection with the Hebrew Scriptures: "For me, it dealt with the same spiritual subject, the same benediction, the same stakes: the salvation of men, the love of God, the knowledge of God. . . . The identification between the suffering Messiah and persecuted Israel [the Jewish people] was something intuitive and immediate for me."<sup>xiii</sup>

Jesus, the Jew, knew suffering. As the prophet Isaiah says of the Messiah: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. . . . He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."<sup>xiv</sup>

Lustiger gained a deep appreciation for the Jewishness of his new faith because of his love for his people and his Messiah. It was like the old comedy album entitled, *When You're in Love the Whole World is Jewish*. That phrase captured the way Lustiger saw his world. He now saw the connection between the Passover lamb and the *seders* he took part in as a child with Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."<sup>xv</sup> He saw the continuity of the Old and New Covenants, and in his Jewishness he saw his life's calling. "I was born Jewish and so I remain," he said, "even if that's unacceptable for many. For me, the vocation of Israel is bringing light to the *goyim*. That's my hope and I believe that Christianity is the means for achieving it."<sup>xvi</sup> When appointed Archbishop of Paris in 1981, he said, "For me, this nomination was as if all of a sudden the crucifix began to wear a yellow star."<sup>xvii</sup>

Lustiger remembered his father telling him as a child that they were *Levi'im* and that they had a responsibility. Lustiger believed he belonged to a priesthood greater

## EUGENIO ZOLLI

Born Israel Zoller in 1881, he was appointed chief rabbi of Trieste, Italy, in 1918. In the 1930s, he helped German Jews fleeing the Reich. As World War II broke out, he became Rome's chief rabbi.

In September 1943 the Nazis demanded gold for the lives of the Jews of Rome. Zolli asked for and received a loan of gold from the Vatican. The Nazis reneged and, on October 16, 1943, began to round up the Jews for deportation to Auschwitz. Pope Pius XII interceded with the German ambassador and ordered the Roman clergy to shelter the Jews. The Nazis caught only about one thousand of the eight thousand Jews in Rome.

Zolli, who had secretly studied the New Testament, had a vision of Jesus in the synagogue while presiding over the Yom Kippur service in October 1944. A few days later, he resigned his post. He was baptized in 1945 and took the name Eugenio in honor of Pope Pius



(born Eugenio Pacelli).

A controversial figure, Zolli died in 1956. His daughter Miriam stated, “My father felt he was a Jew who had come to believe in the Jewish Messiah. But there was no rejection of his Jewish roots or of the Jewish people.”

than that of the Catholic Church. In his interview with *Yediot Aharonot* he said, “What is a Jew, if not a man with a calling for his fellow man? For this reason he is rejected and persecuted and killed! How could I wish to cease being Jewish? It is not man’s prerogative to decide what he should be, but first to God . . . I have never desired to not be Jewish.”<sup>xviii</sup> As he tried to explain to his parents, “I am not leaving you. I am not passing into the enemy camp. I’m becoming what I am. I am not stopping being a Jew—just the opposite. I’m discovering a way of living it.”<sup>xix</sup>

He did live it. And he was never ashamed to proclaim it. Two days after he was named Archbishop of Paris, Lustiger told a reporter for a Jewish news service, “I’ve always considered myself a Jew, even if that’s not the opinion of some rabbis.”<sup>xx</sup> Nor did the cleric nicknamed “the bulldozer” hesitate to confront. He was asked to be the keynote speaker at a major

Catholic conference in Germany. He really did not want to go, but accepted on condition that he be invited to speak a week before on one of the national radio stations. On the air, he said, “I will come in my capacity as bishop to the conference, but I will say to you who I am: I am a Jew whose mother you executed. That is what you have done.”<sup>xxi</sup>

He stood for his Jewish people at every opportunity. To the Jews he was a Catholic and to the Catholics he was a Jew. Cardinal Monsignor Pézeril said of him, “To know him is a grace and a trial, because he is not like us.”<sup>xxii</sup> His Jewish identity was central to his faith and what he saw as his Levitical calling.

How should we regard his Jewish identity? His life and his death provide the answer. He was born a Jew and he made sure he would die a Jew. In attending to all the details of his funeral, he made it clear that the Jewish rites would be done with at least as much prominence as the

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Catholic rites.

Aaron Jean-Marie Lustiger was the first Jew to be buried at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in its 1100-year history. Even in his death, the archbishop welcomed everyone. The coffin was carried by six cardinals and placed with care in the court in front of the cathedral and under a flag with a *Magen David* (Star of David) representing those deported to concentration camps. The president of France followed in silence and took a single seat in front of the coffin.

The Archbishop of Paris said a word of introduction for a younger Lustiger, his nephew Jonas Moses, who poured earth from the land of Israel on the coffin of the good cardinal in the presence of the French President. This earth was gathered, in accordance with Lustiger's will, from Jericho and the western side of the Mount of Olives, from which a generous view of Jerusalem could be enjoyed. Before being brought to France, this earth was placed before the *Kotel* (Western Wall). His nephew then read, in Hebrew, Psalm 135 that begins the great *Hallel*: "Praise ye the Lord." Then his beloved cousin and long-time companion, Arno Lustiger, led the *Mourner's*

*Kaddish* in front of that ancient cathedral where representatives of the Jewish community joined in among 5,000 mourners. The plaque that, at his request, was placed in the Cathedral of Notre Dame above the funerary crypt, reads: "I was born Jewish. I received the name of my paternal grandfather [a Yiddish-speaking rabbi in Silicia], Aaron. Having become Christian by faith and baptism, I have remained Jewish. As did the Apostles."<sup>xxiii</sup>



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- vii. "Cardinal Lustiger Funeral on Friday," <http://www.radio-orkla.com/content/view/1917/2/> (August 8, 2007).
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- xvii. Ibid.
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