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# From a young Jewish model to a Salvation Army Officer

*Fête juive* and the case of Chava Slavatitsky

MERCÉDESZ CZIMBALMOS AND DÓRA PATARICZA



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**ABSTRACT** • The captivating painting of Helene Schjerfbeck, *Fête juive / Lehtimajanjuhla* (1883), is considered to this day an exceptional piece of art with significant cultural value. It already carries great value, aside from its artistic quality and how it showcases the Jewish feast of Sukkot. What is not evident from simply looking at the artwork, however, is the intriguing background story to the fate of its models – more specifically, that of its female model, Chava Slavatitsky, and the ‘scandal’ connected with her story. Her name became known all over Finland, as it gained significant attention from the local press, perhaps mainly as it occurred during the turbulent times of the late nineteenth century when the question of Jewish emancipation in Finland was frequently discussed in society. This article aims to briefly introduce the reader to Schjerfbeck’s motivation in creating the painting and to its representation of the Sukkot 140 years ago, as well as aiming to tell the extraordinary story of its relatively unknown young sitter, including her abduction and conversion to Christianity. Hence, this contribution aims to provide an addendum to the Jewish history of the country in the late 1800s and to briefly reflect on the nature of Jewish–Christian relations of the era.

## The early history of Jews in Finland

The topic of the painting, as well as the fact that both models belonged to the ‘newly settled’ Jewish minority in Finland, call for a brief historical introduction to the history of Jews in Finland.<sup>1</sup>

The history of the Jewish community in Finland can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, closely linked to the presence of Jewish soldiers drafted in the Russian army and posted in Finland, known

as the Cantonists (see e.g. Torvinen 1989; Illman and Harviainen 2002; Czimbalmos and Patarcza 2019).

The first Jews to be allowed to settle in Finland without the obligation to undergo conversion to Christianity were young men who served in the Russian army. They were granted permission by military authorities to settle in the territory of Finland upon completing their lengthy military service. Most of these Jewish soldiers and their families hailed from the governates of Lithuania, Belarus and North-Eastern Poland. 1858 marked a significant development, as a law was enacted allowing former Russian army servicemen to reside in the localities where they had served. Soldiers’ spouses either accompanied the soldiers or were invited to Finland. It was during

1 First and foremost, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to Sue Cederkreutz-Suhonen and Sandy Fuchs for their invaluable assistance in providing all necessary background information for this article.



Narinkkatori. Helsinki City Museum (KM).

this period that Jewish soldiers, along with their families, laid the foundation for Jewish communities in the country. Jewish individuals were permitted to reside in cities such as Helsinki, Turku and Viipuri (Illman and Harviainen 2002: 275–6).

Nevertheless, in 1889, the government still delineated Jewish rights to reside in Finnish territory precisely, granting only temporary residence permits for six months. Stringent regulations from 1869 also restricted their professional activities, leading Jewish individuals to earn their livelihood as second-hand clothing merchants. Sales were allowed only within their respective city limits and in markets other than those used by Finnish merchants. To facilitate their sales, market stalls known as *narinkka-torikojuja* in Finnish (Eng. ‘market-square booths’)<sup>2</sup> were

2 The Finnish word *narinkka* is derived from the Russian word на рынке (pronounced as ‘na rynke’), meaning ‘at the market square’.

erected, from which the name Narinkkatori in Kampi – one of the most central locations in contemporary Helsinki – derives. This marketplace existed in Helsinki from 1876 until 1931, near the Russian military training fields. Here, retired Russian soldiers and their families could start small businesses, providing a humble living mainly through sales of second-hand clothes, cigars, berries and kitsch, so-called ‘infamous’ or ‘pariah occupations’. Narinkka was also, to some extent, a symbol of insecurity and poverty (Ekholm 2013: 85–90).

It was not until Finland gained independence that significant progress occurred. On 12 January 1918, the Finnish Parliament approved legislation granting citizenship rights to the Cantonist Jews and their families residing in the country, initiating the first steps towards equality (Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2019: 2). This process, and the fight for civil rights, have been described in detail in the comprehensive work of the

Finnish-Jewish activist, Santeri Jacobsson (or Jakobson) (1883–1955) in his book from 1951, ‘The Fight for Human Rights. A Socio-historical Study of the Stages of the Jewish Question in Sweden and Finland’ (Fin. *Taistelu ihmisoikeuksista. Yhteiskunnallis-historiallinen tutkimus Ruotsin ja Suomen juutalaiskysymyksen vaiheista*). Amongst several other matters, Jacobsson made reference to the case of Slavatitsky in his work – as elaborated later in the current article.

### *Fête juive / Lehtimajanjuhla*

The artistic talent of the 21-year-old painter Helene Schjerfbeck (b. 1862 Helsinki, d. 1946 Saltsjöbaden) was already widely recognized 140 years ago. She had begun to make her mark in the art world at the young age of 17, when she sold her historical painting *A Wounded Soldier in the Snow* (Fin. *Haavoittunut soturi hangella*, Swe. *En sårad finsk krigare utsträckt på snön*). This remarkable achievement got her into the spotlight, leading to comparisons with the most prestigious artists of her time, including Albert Edelfelt.

In line with its title, the extraordinary painting, *Fête juive / Lehtimajanjuhla* captures a scene from the Jewish feast, Sukkot. The oil painting originally premiered at the Salon de Paris in 1883, showcasing Schjerfbeck’s talent to a broader audience.

The painting was created in the attic of the collaborative atelier of the artists Helene Schjerfbeck and Maria Wiik at Mariankatu 12 in Helsinki, which they had been renting together since September 1882 (Konttinen 2016: 90; Holger *et al.* 2011: 235). Schjerfbeck did not like the size of the painting, and so she asked Magnus, her brother, to cut it smaller. As he was not willing to do so, in the end, the gallerist and art dealer Gösta Stenman carried out the task, resulting in the current

size of the painting, measuring 118 x 172 centimetres (Konttinen 2016: 100). In 1917, Stenman sold the painting to the art collector Ane Gyllenberg and, thanks to that transaction, the financial situation of Schjerfbeck was secured for a long period (Holger *et al.* 2011: 235). The artwork is exhibited as part of the Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation’s collection in Villa Gyllenberg in Helsinki. The painting depicts an intimate scene of a seemingly young girl and an older Jewish man in an indoor environment. In the foreground of the painting, two central figures serve as the focal point. These figures are believed to be the models Chava (later Eva) Slavatitsky and a male figure whose identity has been disputed. He is believed to be either Chava’s father, Abram Slavatitsky (b. 1841 Augustow, d. 1912 Helsinki),<sup>3</sup> or Abram’s friend, Alter Fiedler, a fruit and tobacco trader (b. 1840 Warsaw, d. 1926 Helsinki).

The setting is swathed in a warm light, casting a serene glow over the entire composition. The depiction of incense may be attributed to the influence of Orientalism as an artistic style, which often incorporated exotic elements. Even though incense is not used in Jewish practices, its inclusion in the painting may serve an aesthetic or symbolic purpose rather than a religious one within the context of Sukkot – a somewhat nebulous depiction. The background features an indoor landscape, representing the temporary huts or *sukkahs* traditionally constructed during the holiday. These huts are adorned with greenery, symbolizing the harvest season and the temporary dwellings of the Jews during their exodus from Egypt.

Schjerfbeck’s attention to detail is evident in the careful rendering of the landscape.

3 Or 1840/1 Novogradovka, Odessa (Amityz n.d.).

Nevertheless, at first glance, little connects the painting with how one might imagine the feast of Sukkot to be. Chava is shown wearing a light-coloured summer dress. It is difficult to say whether the way the male model's outfit in the painting depicts a regular male attire of the time or that of an observant Eastern European Jew. While the coat he wore is like the long black coats *kapotes* worn by most Jewish men at the time, the hat placed on the chair is somewhat different from the hats Askhenazi Jewish men wore (and wear) traditionally; in fact it resembles a cylinder. Importantly, if the male model in the painting were an observant Jewish man, it would be logical to assume that the female model might also be observant – but her dress signals something else.

### Schjerfbeck's inspiration and the Tiszaeszlár blood libel

Schjerfbeck had previously engaged Jewish girls as models, too: the art historian Riitta Konttinen points out (2016: 92) that the painter would often walk on the cobblestone streets of Lapinlahdenkatu during her childhood with her mother as they made their way to the old cemetery in Hietaniemi where her father and younger siblings lay at rest. The cemetery has different areas, including a Jewish cemetery, and it is located quite close to the current Jewish Community of Helsinki and thus to the area where Jews at the time mainly resided. Therefore, along this route, young Helene may have first glimpsed the local Jews and possibly their *sukkahs*, leaving an imprint upon her consciousness.



*Fête juive / Lehtimajanjuhla*. Helene Schjerfbeck. 1883. Villa Gyllenberg / Matias Uusikylä (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Interestingly, Schjerfbeck's inspiration for this painting was not only rooted in her interest in Finnish Jewry or the artistic value she saw in depicting the Sukkot. In addition to her interest in the topic, other reasons may have inspired her to the extent that she chose to depict a distinctively Jewish topic with Jewish models. Hence, Konttinen suggests that both the news of the so-called Tiszaeszlár affair and the pogroms of the time in Russia influenced her choice of motive for the painting (Konttinen 2016: 91–2).

In 1882–3, several Finnish newspapers reported on the Tiszaeszlár affair (see e.g. *Folkwännen* 30.6.1883, 3.7.1883; *Hämäläinen* 27.6.1883). The incident initially began as the investigation of a murder case but escalated into a notorious blood-libel trial that triggered widespread antisemitic sentiments in Austro-Hungary. A local Christian girl, Eszter Solymosi, disappeared from the village of Tiszaeszlár (north-eastern Hungary). The investigation of the possible small-town murder led to baseless accusations against Jews of murdering her, resulting in several newspaper debates, antisemitic agitation and communal violence (Nemes 2007: 20). Eventually, a dead body was found in the process of the investigation, but it was not that of Eszter. Nonetheless, antisemitic agitators and their incitement did not seem to stop. The subsequent trial ended in the acquittal of all the accused, underscoring the unfounded nature of the allegations.

As the painter grew into young adulthood, she may have been influenced by these factors and thus consciously chose to capture Jewish subjects on her canvas. However, it is essential to recognise that artists base their works on personal perspectives and interpretations, and so, in this case, the painting does not necessarily aim to be a faithful representation of 'true elements' but rather an artistic portrayal. This conclusion is important to

keep in mind as we investigate, in the following section, how Sukkot may have been celebrated in Finland at the time, in light of the available historical sources.

## The Jewish feast of Sukkot

Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) serves as one of the three pilgrimage festivals, along with Pesach (Passover) and Shavuot (Feast of the Weeks), which collectively commemorate important events in Jewish history. It recalls the period following the liberation from Egyptian slavery, during which the Israelites embarked on a journey through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. It is celebrated for eight days outside Israel and seven days within, and it holds a significant place in the Jewish religious calendar. According to Jewish law, individuals are required to build a *sukkah* and dwell in it for seven<sup>4</sup> days to symbolise this connection with their ancestors.<sup>5</sup> The Sukkot festival spans seven days, with the first two designated as full holidays during which work is prohibited. The construction of the *sukkah*, a symbolic representation of the temporary nature of the Israelites' dwellings in the desert, is undertaken individually and communally, with communal *sukkahs* often used for celebrations in contemporary settings.<sup>6</sup>

The construction of the *sukkah* adheres to specific guidelines. For the roof of the

4 The holiday lasts eight days in the diaspora.

5 Subsequently, five intermediary days, known as 'Chol Hamoed', follow, during which some work is allowed (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 530).

6 Sukkot also serves as a harvest festival, often called the 'Festival of the Harvest' or *hag ha-asif*. In the agricultural context of Israel, it marks the time for gathering the autumn harvest and provides a sacred context for celebrating the land's fertility (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2023).

*sukkah*, it is customary to use leaves or straw. Its walls (minimum three) can be made from any material. Notably, the *sukkah* should be positioned outdoors, beneath the open sky, to ensure an unobstructed view of the heavens. While it used to be a practice in some places, in modern days, in colder times, many do not sleep in the *sukkah* any more, and, for example when rain penetrates the *sukkah*, it is forbidden to do so. Sukkot also includes the tradition of creating a bouquet consisting of four distinct plant species collectively called *arba minim*. These elements – *etrog* (citron fruit), *lulav* (palm frond), *arava* (willow branches) and *hadass* (myrtle branches) – are blessed to express gratitude for the year’s agricultural yield (Eisenberg 2004: 226–33; Kutch *et al.* 2007: 299–302).

### Sukkot in Finland, and Schjerfbeck’s depiction

Perhaps needless to say, celebrating Sukkot in Finland has posed unique challenges. Firstly, Sukkot, being the last Jewish high holiday in the autumn season, also meant that Nordic weather conditions prevented Finnish Jews using the *sukkahs* like other Jews in the south. It is improbable that any Jew in Finland has ever slept in a *sukkah*, given the relatively cold weather in late September or October.

Secondly, palm branches, myrtles and etrogs grow only in southern regions, necessitating various commercial enterprises to facilitate their procurement and delivery to colder areas inhabited by fellow believers. As a result, Finnish Jewish communities had to rely on trade and communication networks within the broader Jewish diaspora. They established connections with Jewish merchants and communities in other parts of Europe, particularly those with established trade routes for religious ritual items, such as the necessary four species. Over time, as

transportation and communication networks improved and global Jewish communities became more interconnected, the possibilities for obtaining these in Finland evolved, paralleling the changing dynamics seen, for example, in the United States (Sarna and Eleff 2022). These businesses had to operate with impeccable precision since this merchandise was decidedly seasonal and could not afford a single day’s delay.<sup>7</sup>

Relying on imported goods, of course, posed logistical challenges and concerns regarding shipping risks. As major Jewish holidays approached, and, for example, the etrog shipments had not yet arrived, anxiety would grow within the community. Some local merchants even exploited the desperate situation by selling lemons as a substitute for etrogs (Oranim 2018).

Sukkot in Finland was slightly different from the holiday in warm climates. Perhaps this also encouraged and allowed Schjerfbeck to conceal specific hints in her painting, which, when examined closely, reveal that her artwork revolves around the theme of Sukkot – instead of presenting the holiday in a conventional festive manner.

The sitters are resting upon a mattress – meant to indicate that the *sukkah* is a temporary home. Furthermore, the etrog (or the fruit that served as one) portrayed in the painting is a distinctive sign of the holiday – while it is difficult to know whether it was indeed a genuine etrog. The presence of green plants in the background symbolises that the huts are built under the sky and are thus an organic part of nature. It is important to recognise that Helene Schjerfbeck approached

7 In Yiddish, they express a similar idea with the phrase *etrogim nakh sukkes*, meaning that the etrog is worthless if it arrives late, akin to the saying in English ‘a day late and a dollar short’.

the subject from her artistic perspective, not necessarily adhering to strict accuracy.

While there are no known photographs of Sukkot huts from the 1880s, or in historical records and images of Finnish Jewish workplaces in Narinkka (KM N200011, N38947, etc.), the reason Schjerfbeck may have chosen this topic for her painting may lie in the very nature of the Finnish Jewish everyday realm. Of course, Finnish Jews worked in Narinkka around the year, including during Sukkot; spending their days in these small wooden booths may have resembled the experience of *sukkab*-dwelling during Sukkot in the painter's eyes.

The process of naming the painting adds an intriguing layer to its history. Schjerfbeck initially titled it *Fête juive* (Eng. 'Jewish Holiday') for the Paris exhibition. The Finnish (*Lehtimajanjubla*) and Swedish titles (*Lövhyddohögtid*) of the work and the person(s) who formulated them would provide valuable insights into its reception and interpretation of the painting over time. Unfortunately, however, it is not known who gave the artwork its more precise Finnish title, *Lehtimajanjubla* (Eng. 'Arbour Celebration'), which is the common vernacular name of the holiday Sukkot. However, it is clear that this title is much more revealing than its French counterpart. Having elucidated the artistic background of the painting and placed the motif within its historical and local context, it is now time to turn to the models in the painting and what is known of their life trajectories.

### The models

The young female figure in the painting is modelled on a Jewish girl, Chava (Eva) Slavatitsky (Slavatitzky or Slavatitzkij), who was born in Turku on 6 June 1873. Her parents were Abram (Avram) Isak Slavatitsky (b.

1841 Lomza Guv., Poland, d. 1912 Helsinki) and Mirjam (Maria) Reisle (Hesle) (b. 1845 Lomza, d. 1920 Helsinki). Abram Slavatitsky, a cobbler by profession, had served as a soldier in the 92nd Petshorshka infantry regiment (Amitys n.d.).

Schjerfbeck most likely found her models by scouting the streets of Helsinki. In this relatively small town, the residential locations of the Jewish community were widely known among the local populace. However, a noteworthy aspect of this practice was – and perhaps is to this day – the initial transition of an individual into a modelling role, which could present particular challenges. Chava, who had prior experience as a model for Edelfelt in 1882 (*Muisto Espanjasta*, 'Memory from Spain', Pohjanmaan museo, Vaasa), possessed distinctive features that set her apart. Her exotic countenance, characterised by dark skin and hair, made her conspicuously 'non-Finnish' in appearance, even when simply strolling through the streets. This unique appearance probably contributed to her being chosen as a model for artistic representation. As a result, Chava was already a fairly experienced model by 1883 (Konttinen 2016: 92). The ten-year-old model and the twenty-two-year-old painter got along well, and Chava even told Helene her Yiddish nickname, Hafki (Chave > Chavke (Khafke, Khafki)), a Lithuanian Yiddish diminutive form of Chava (Konttinen 2016: 96; Muir 2004: 185).

When it comes to the male character in the painting, a debate has emerged over the identity. According to some suggestions, he was either Alter Fiedler, a merchant (Amitys n.d.), or Abram Slavatitsky, the father of Chava. Sue Cederkreutz-Suhonen, the retired head guide of Villa Gyllenberg, where Schjerfbeck's painting is housed, believes that the man in the painting is most likely Chava's father (Bergström and Cederkreutz-Suhonen



2003: 22–5). Konttinen also suggests the male model is Slavatitsky (Konttinen 2016: 92). However, the catalogue of Schjerfbeck's works, published in 2012, identifies the model as Fiedler (Ahtola-Moorhouse 2012: 111).

According to Sandy Fuchs, a descendant of the Slavatitsky family, Chava's father, the shoemaker Abram Slavatitsky, was not considered particularly attractive, possibly explaining why he may have asked his friend, Alter Fiedler, to serve as the model instead. Fiedler was known for his business selling tobacco and fruit at the Narinkka market. Sandy Fuchs possesses a photograph featuring both Slavatitsky and Fiedler.<sup>8</sup> However, attributing their identities solely on the basis of the resemblance in their portraits from when the painting was created is rather difficult, if not impossible. What is certainly known is that Abraham and Alter knew each other, as they were both actively involved in the Bikur Cholim association (Fin. Juutalainen sairapuyhdistys),<sup>9</sup> which is dedicated to fulfilling the *mitzvah* (commandment) of visiting the sick in Jewish tradition.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is the physical contact between the two protagonists: it is worth considering the strict rules within Judaism concerning interactions between individuals of the opposite gender. While Chava was only around ten years old when this painting was made – and so was not considered to be an adult from the perspective of the Jewish law – it seems improbable that she would have been allowed to touch an unrelated male, weighing in for the model

to be the father. Another debated detail in the painting relates to the physical contact between the two models: the father's hand. He appears to touch the girl's hair, possibly in a blessing manner, or, as the art historian Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse suggests, his hand might simply be partially in his pocket. While Cederkreutz-Suhonen interprets this position as a blessing gesture, alternative viewpoints, including those of Ahtola-Moorhouse, have been proposed. Chava, the girl depicted in the painting, lies on a mat in an unusual position but does not seem to be in poor health or in a bad state, needing a blessing.<sup>10</sup>

While the depiction of Sukkot in this particular painting is somewhat different from those one might be used to or expect to see, it offers its viewers an interesting, perhaps artistic, depiction of the feast and raises interesting questions in connection with Finnish Jewish traditions at the time.

### The case of Chava Slavatitsky (1891)

Besides the undeniable value, both artistic and of commemorating Jewish cultural heritage, there is another exciting addition to the tale of this painting. In 1891, the newspapers reported on Chava, and a particular case concerning her was at the forefront of public discourse.

As mentioned before, the first Jews to receive the permanent right to settle in Finland without the obligation to undergo conversion to Christianity were the Cantonists. Before the Cantonists arrived in Finland, of course, some Jewish individuals dwelled in the territory and underwent conversion to Christianity

8 Sandy Fuchs – personal correspondence with the authors. We would like to thank Fuchs for this valuable contribution.

9 Bikur Cholim societies have a long-standing presence in Jewish communities worldwide, with records dating back to the early Middle Ages.

10 Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse – personal correspondence with the authors. We would like to thank Ahtola-Moorhouse for providing this valuable insight into the analysis of the painting.



Portraits of Chava Slavatitsky. Fuchs family archives.

(Torvinen 1989). A recent study by Sanna Ryyänen on the representation of Jews in the Finnish press before the Second World War (Ryyänen 2023) points out that in several periodicals of the time, the conversion of Jews to Christianity was often discussed as something that was ‘expected’ and as the only ‘help’ that could be provided to Jews. At the same time, conversion to Judaism was deemed bizarre and unlikely.

In this ‘spirit’ in the late nineteenth century, several Finns were engaged in educating Jewish children and establishing schools for them – with the ulterior motive of converting them to Christianity. In his previously mentioned book on Jewish rights and emancipation in Finland, Santeri Jacobsson provides us with perhaps a vital source on such matters – from a non-Christian angle. In addition to the case discussed in the current contribution, he also draws on the example of the son of Isak Urén, who was taken by force

from his father and converted to Christianity (Jacobsson 1951: 264–6). His case featured in several newspapers of the time (see e.g. *Wasa Framåt* 24.8.1881; *Borgåbladet* 12.11.1881, 11.2.1882).

The Salvation Army also made a ‘notable contribution’ to such conversion efforts. In 1891, the seventeen-year-old Chava Slavatitsky went missing. During the police investigation, the Slavatitsky parents identified a woman named Alma Forsblom as one of the ladies who had lured their daughter into running away from home after teaching biblical (Christian) topics to her. The story of Chava led to a lawsuit that came before the Helsinki District Court on 21 July 1891. Initially, the court had found that two ‘noble’ (Fin. *säätyläinen*) women, namely Hedwig von Haartman and Louise af Forselles, had lured her into running away from home and made her convert to Christianity (Sillantaus 2020; Swanström 2016: 57–61).

The case appeared in a great variety of newspapers, including, for example, *Kotka*, *Tammerfors Aftonblad*, *Hufvudstadsbladet*, *Fredrikshamnns Tidning*, often with identical texts – the practice of copying and publishing the exact same text in different newspapers or periodicals was, of course, a common practice at the time (Rantala *et al.* 2019). The case became so well known that it was even written about in the United States: in the 16 July 1896 print of the Swedish-language weekly newspaper in California, *Vestkusten*, Slavatitsky is referred to as ‘the abducted Jewess’ (Swe. ‘den bortröfvade judinnan’).

The newspaper *Östra Finland* (26.9.1891) writes quite bluntly about the young girl’s case and tells its readers that Chava was brought to the ‘homebase of humbug, America’. The exact text not only ridicules the Salvation Army and its actions but also explains that Chava was indeed abducted:

Well, the previously mentioned missing Jewish girl Chava Slavatitsky has now been almost found! It seems she was intended to be dispatched to the homestead of humbug, America. The industrial chevaliers of Salvation, with ladies from high society, first abducted her, then hid her for some time from spying eyes, and then, when the investigations were starting to slacken, took her to Gothenburg and now, finally to America, from where it seems she will be restored by her relatives. Thus, she has escaped the retractile claws of the ‘salving’ predators involved in shady business. But this only to be returned to Judaism, which in a religious respect, however, stands above the religiously swindling salvation league, which makes Christianity into a mere variety show.<sup>11</sup> (*Östra Finland* 26.9.1891)

11 Swedish original (translation by Ruth Illman): ‘Nä, att den förut omtalade försvunna judeflickan Chava Slavatitski nu blifvit så

Other newspapers, such as *Kotka* (22.10.1891) or *Fredrikshamnns Tidning* (21.10.1891), on the other hand, seem slightly more reserved with their wording on the case. Nevertheless, they do suggest that the girl was not entirely aware of the circumstances and may not have acted of her own free will, as they write, ‘However this may be, her proselytising friends in Finland and Sweden did not spare anything to “capture a soul”’.<sup>12</sup> Most news sources took the same text from each other and rarely strayed from it. While some of the sources suggested that Chava Slavatitsky may not have completely understood the situation and the intentions behind her ‘saviours’, the complex circumstances, including the manipulation that the girl was likely to have been subjected to, were not detailed in the written accounts of the case. The daily newspaper *Päivälehti*, for example, wrote an exceptionally detailed story on Slavatitsky, with several mentions of Chava’s parents abusing the young woman – which was related by the officers of the Salvation Army when explaining their stance:

godt som återfunnen! Hon tycks ha varit ärnad att expedieras till humbugens stamort Amerika. Frälsningsligans industririddare med damer ur societeten hade först röfvat henne, derefter någon tid dolt henne för spanande blickar, sedermera, då etterforskningarne började slappas, fört henne till Göteborg och nu sist till Amerika, hvarifrån hon nu lär komma att återbördas af sina anhöriga. Emellertid har hon sälunda undslupit de “frälsande” geschäftsrofdjurens retraktila klor. Men blott för att återföras till judendomen, hvilken i religiöst afseende dock står öfver den religionsskojande frälsningsligan som bara gör kristendomen till ett varieténum mer.’

12 Swedish original (translation by Mercedesz Czimbalmos): ‘Huru härmad än må förhålla sig säkert är emellertid att intet sparats af hennes proselytifrånande vänner i Finland och Sverige för att “fånga en själ”.’

The girl had asked if she could visit Miss H[aartman] to read the Bible, and after receiving an affirmative response, she had visited Miss H[aartman] multiple times and had disclosed that she had been badly mistreated at home, leading to her to stay in the hospital. When Miss H[aartman] was planning to leave during the New Year, she had advised Chava to turn to Miss Forsblom. The girl had frequently lamented her profound unhappiness. One evening, Chava had come to Miss H[aartman] dressed in slippers and a shawl, explaining that she no longer dared to go to Miss Forsblom because of her parents and had mentioned that she had collected a small amount of money to escape to Sweden. She had asked Miss H[aartman] to procure a place for her there. She was willing to take any place as long as she could leave her home, particularly fearing that she might be forced into marriage.<sup>13</sup> (Päivälehti 15.10.1891)

13 Finnish original (translation by Dóra Pataricza): 'Oli kysynyt saisiko hän käydä neiti H:n luona lukemassa raamattua ja saatuaan myöntävän vastauksen, oli hän käynyt useampia kertoja neiti H:n luona sekä kertonut, että häntä oli pahoin pidelty kotonaan ja tämän johdosta maannut sairashuoneessa. — Kun neiti H:n uudenwuoden aikana piti matkustaa pois, oli hän neuvonut Chawaa kääntymään neiti Forsblomin puoleen. Tyttö oli usein walittanut olewansa suuresti onneton. Eräänä iltana oli Chawa tullut neiti H:n luo puettuna tohweleihin, ja saali päässä, ja sanonut ettei hän wanhempainsa wuoksi enää uskaltanut mennä neiti Forsblomin luo ja kertonut koonneensa wähan rahaa paetakseen Ruotisiin sekä pyytännyt neiti H:ta hankkimaan hänelle paikan siellä. Hän olisi taipuwainen ottamaan minkä paikan hywänsä kun hän waan pääsisi kotoaan. Warsinkin oli hän pelännyt että hän naitettaisiin.'

The same article mentions that Chava was hospitalised as a result of the 'assaults' and that she had expressed her interest in converting to Christianity. Thus, the local officers of the Salvation Army requested a meeting with the person in the organisation who was responsible for Jewish missionary activities (Fin. *juutalaislähetysaarnaja*). Without accessing the hospital records at the time or inquiring from other – perhaps more objective sources – it is difficult to know whether the girl was really physically abused or not.

In Jacobsson's account, these cases involve the fervent Christian zeal to undertake conversion efforts within the Jewish community. The way in which the court, in the end, failed to return the young girl to her parents can, from a modern perspective, be regarded as an early instance of structural antisemitism in Finland. It is worthwhile to quote Jacobsson's exact words:

The case in question was about the conversion of a girl under 17 years of age, which was largely settled by the Helsinki District Court. It concerned the involvement of noblewomen. In May 1891, a Jew named Slovatski [Slavatitsky] living in Helsinki complained to the Attorney General of Finland that his underage daughter had been lured from him by some Salvation Army officers with the intention of converting her to Christianity. The parents explained that the girl had left home and asked the Attorney General to help them get their child back. The Attorney General sent a letter of complaint to the police authorities, asking them to investigate the matter and take the necessary measures.

During a police interrogation on 15 May 1891, the girl's mother accused two ladies of the Swedish-speaking upper class of having lured her minor child into leaving her home, and of providing her

with [Christian] religious education, in order to convert her to Christianity. The accused admitted that they had given the girl religious education until she disappeared from the town to strangers but did not admit any involvement in her escape. During the trial, however, it turned out that these two 'religion teachers' were, amongst other noblewomen, involved in organising the girl's escape.<sup>14</sup> (Jacobsson 1951: 267–8)

The legal documents suggest that the girl had been secretly taken to England via Sweden. She was baptised in England in 1892 (Amity's n.d.). The case underwent multiple hearings in the Helsinki District Court, and even Swedish authorities were involved

14 Finnish original (translation by Dóra Pata-ricza): 'Kysymyksessä oli alle 17-vuotiaan tytön kääntyminen, jota selviteltiin pitkälti Helsingin raastuvanoikeudessa. Siihen olivat sekaantuneet yleiset säätyläisnaiset. Toukokuussa 1891 valitti Sloatitski-niminen Helsingissä asuva juutalainen kenraalikuvernöörille, että eräät pelastusarmeijalaiset olivat houkutelleet luoksensa hänen alaikäisen tyttärensä aikoen käännyttää tämän kristinuskoon. Vanhemmat selittivät, että tyttö oli poistunut kotoaan ja pyysivät takaisin. Kenraalikuvernööri lähetti valituskirjelmän poliisiviranomaiselle kehoittaen, että asia tutkittaisiin ja ryhdyttäisiin sen vaatimiin toimenpiteisiin.

Toukokuun 15 päivänä 1891 suoritetussa poliisikuulustelussa tytön äiti kahta ruotsinkielisen yläluokkaan kuuluva neitiä siitä, että nämä olivat houkutelleet hänen alaikäisen lapsensa pakenemaan kotoaan ja antaneet tytölle uskonnonopetusta käännyttääkseen hänet kristinuskoon. Syytetyt tunnustivatkin tytölle uskonnonopetusta siihen saakka, kunnes tyttö hävisi kaupungista teille tietymättömille mutta eivät myöntäneet sekaantuneensa pakenemiseen. Oikeudenkäynnissä selvisi kuitenkin, että nämä kaksi "uskonnonopettajaa" olivat lukuisten muiden aatelisnaisten kanssa järjestäneet tytön karkaamisen.'

in the search for the missing girl, drawing international attention to the matter. On 9 December 1891, the court issued its verdict. Louise af Forselles and Hedvig von Haartman were found guilty of luring Chava away from her home and facilitating her escape from Finland. The two women were ordered to pay a fine of 150 Finnish marks and an additional 150 marks to cover the trial expenses. Later, however, the sentence was changed in the higher courts, and the two women were only forced to pay the legal costs to the Slavatitsky family (Sillantaus 2020; Swanström 2016: 57–61). In the following section, we will look more closely into the organisation that spurred these women to involve themselves with the young Slavatitsky, the Salvation Army and its religious ideology at the time, relating to the Jews.

### The Salvation Army and 'the abductors'

The roots of the Salvation Army date back to 1865 when William and Catherine Booth began missionary activities among the poor in the East End of London. The 'Christian Mission' was reformed in 1878 into an 'army'. International research suggests that the Salvation Army was formed in many ways, depending on the local and national contexts of the different countries in which they were present (Lundin 2013: 246). The Salvation Army came to Finland with revival movements of the Free Church. Its first leader, Constantin Boije af Gennäs (1854–1934), started evangelising in an old storehouse on Simonkatu in Helsinki in 1880.

Boije and two other Finnish pioneers, Hedvig von Haartman (1862–1902) and Alva Forsius (1866–1902), went to London in the spring of 1889 to train as rescue officers. After they returned to their home country in the autumn, the Salvation Army's activities began in earnest in Finland, and its

first official meeting was held on 8 November 1889 (Könönen 1964: 43–7). Von Haartman herself became the head of the Finnish branch of the Salvation Army in 1890 (Honkala 1997). It is known that in addition to von Haartman, Louise af Forselles also participated in its activities. She was a prominent religious figure at the time and later became the chairwoman of the Young Women's Christian Association (Franzén 1997).

### Religious zealosity, anti-Judaism or antisemitism?

While anti-Judaism can be generally regarded as religious hatred towards Jews based on Christian theological misconceptions, and antisemitism is more frequently used to describe a modern phenomenon, which builds on pseudo-scientific race theories and taxonomy of racial classification revolving around physiognomic and/or biological differences (Moyaert 2022). Eliminationist, racial and cultural forms of anti-Judaism were present in Europe throughout history. Similarly, forced displacements or violence to force the baptism of Jews were common throughout Europe.

Before the Holocaust, it was not uncommon for Jews to convert to Christianity out of economic necessity or being subjected to disdain. In several countries, restricted land ownership, ghettoisation and mandatory dress codes were all common 'tools' to separate and differentiate Jewish society from the Christian. Jews were often pushed to choose between conversion to Christianity, migration or death (see e.g. Ben-Sasson *et al.* 1976; Rosman and Cohen 2009). Of course, the approaches have changed over time, and in many countries the rights of Jewish citizens were also expanded. Nevertheless, the expectation of eventual Jewish conversion to Christianity is not a new phenomenon in several Christian denominations.

In tsarist Russia, Jewish children who were conscripted into military institutions (the Cantonists) were put in conditions in which they were essentially forced to adopt Christianity (Slutsky 2007). By the end of the nineteenth century, Jews had gained civil rights in most European countries. However, Finland in this respect remained peculiar: Finnish Jews were only granted civil rights in independent Finland (Torvinen 1989). It is also important to note that the Church historian Paavo Ahonen's doctoral dissertation shows that from the modern perspective, there was indeed antisemitism in the Finnish Church at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ahonen 2017). It would, therefore, be unrealistic to think that this sense of antisemitism, as such, has not been present in the Church or other Christian institutions. In this environment, whether Chava was forcefully abducted or manipulated to escape, her case (as well as the case of the son of Isak Urén, mentioned earlier) indeed touched on a sore spot for the local Jewish minority.

Of course, it is difficult to know which account presents Slavatitsky's case most objectively or how aware the girl was of the situation. Whether the case was a representation of simple religious zealosity, anti-Judaism or antisemitism is undoubtedly dependent on the positioning of the spectator. What is clear is that the available textual sources do not provide us with the most straightforward account of the matter.

According to Slavatitsky's descendant, Sandy Fuchs, there is no clear consensus on the case among her family members.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that there were proselytising activities in Finland prior to the case of this girl, and such missionary work was also conducted in the Salvation Army in general. The newspaper

15 Sandy Fuchs – correspondence with the authors.

articles of the time suggest that the idea of ‘saving’ the girl was frequently referred to by the abductors, as well as by society in general. The media coverage often refers to the activities of the Salvation Army in a manner that questions how ethically they acted in the case of the shoemaker’s daughter.

While she was a model in Schjerfbeck’s painting, she did not gain any outstanding status in Finland – at least not according to the available sources. No detailed biographies were written on her life. As mentioned earlier, the available sources on the matter often referred to each other without detailed critical accounts of the case. Nevertheless, the efforts made to essentially abduct, hide and finally convert Chava to Christianity can be seen as an attempt to assimilate the young woman into the majority Christian society. These efforts also reinforced the idea that leaving Judaism for Christianity is the only path to salvation, a notion that has historically been used to justify anti-Judaic beliefs and forced conversions. Of course, it is not known how deliberately the officers of the Finnish Salvation Army tried to target the Jewish community at large. It is also important to mention that when Salvation Army activities began in the country, there was a prevailing fervour of religious excitement in certain elite circles. Thus, it is not surprising that individuals of high social standing found themselves in the defendant’s dock in the Chava Slavatitsky case, emblematic of the religious fervour and potential religious bias that existed within the country during that period.

It is worth mentioning that Santeri Jacobsson made an important observation when referring to a text published in *Nya Pressen*,<sup>16</sup> which highlighted the societal dou-

ble standards related to this particular case and the conversion efforts:

If this had happened to a child of Lutheran parents, there would be a storm of anger against the baptisers, but when it comes to a child of Jewish parents, the act is to be considered praiseworthy.<sup>17</sup> (*Nya Pressen* 17.1.1889)

Chava’s parents<sup>18</sup> wrote about the case in a text published in *Åbo Tidning* (4.1.1890), suggesting that the girl had already changed her mind about wanting to be baptised and declared to the pastor that she ‘remains, lives and dies a Jew’,<sup>19</sup> which brings into question how much the girl wanted to go through the conversion by herself, or, indirectly, how much agency she had in this particular case. Furthermore, in the same text, the legality of the girl’s conversion to Christianity was also questioned, as she was a minor at the time the conversion took place.

It is, indeed, interesting to think about the legal aspect of this matter: firstly, Jewish residents of Finland did not have citizenship rights at this time. Secondly, as the conversion happened without the consent of the parents, it is right to assume that it may as well be considered illegal. The Freedom of Religion Act (FRA) was accepted by the

16 The authors were unable to locate this specific text in the 17.1.1889 edition of *Nya Pressen*, to which Jacobsson referred.

17 Finnish original (translation by Dóra Pataricza): ‘Jos siten olisi tapahtunut luterilaisten vanhempien lapselle, nousisi myrskyinen suuttumus kastajia vastaan, mutta kun kysymyksessä on juutalaisten vanhempien lapsi, niin tekoa pidetään vain kiitettävänä.’

18 The text was signed with the name ‘A. Raihel’. Jacobsson (1951: 267) indicates that the writers of the texts were Chava’s parents.

19 Swedish original (translation by Mercédesz Czimbalmos): ‘hon är och förblir, lefver och dör judinna’.

Finnish Parliament in 1922, thirty-two years after Chava's mother commented on the case. According to the FRA, a child who has not yet reached 18 years of age belongs to the same religious community as their parents (UVL 267/1922). The law also decided on the religious affiliation of minors whose parents belonged to different religious communities. Later, changes were introduced to this act, allowing children to make joint decisions with their parents regarding their religious affiliation. Nevertheless, at the end of the nineteenth century, Chava Slavatitsky was – as her mother described – a minor whose religious conversion should have been agreed upon with her legal guardians, her parents. Moreover, in the instance that the girl was indeed abused by her family members, surely there should have been the opportunity to take up legal actions against the guardians.

While the 'officers' of the Salvation Army may have only acted out of their pure intentions to help a young woman, it is important to consider that from a modern perspective, what may have lain in the background of these legal decisions could have very well been systematic antisemitism – as previously indicated. It is undeniable that the public may very well have responded differently to the case if the abducted minor was not Jewish – as Jacobsson also indicated in his invaluable contribution.

It might also be interesting to ponder this case from the perspective of Jewish traditions and the reception of conversion to Christianity among Slavatitsky's family and community. According to Jewish tradition, when a child marries out, the parents are supposed to sit *shiva* and mourn the loss of their child. So far, no account describing such an incident has been found. It is known that it was not uncommon for congregants in the Jewish Community of Helsinki to treat intermarried women (who may have

not necessarily converted to Christianity) harshly throughout the twentieth century (Czimbalmos 2019: 44). It can therefore be assumed that in the late nineteenth century, even if the Slavatitsky family was not particularly observant, they may have been traditional enough to sit *shiva*, or to resent the girl because of the conversion. The fact that the family kept in touch with Chava even after her conversion<sup>20</sup> suggests that they did not hold the young woman entirely responsible for what had happened, and so were more forgiving towards her – without clear sources however, these suggestions are mere speculations.

### The new life of Eva

A few years after this incident, on 11 January 1895, in a text in the newspaper *Aura*, Chava was already presented as a young woman of whom it is said 'she expressed the light that she got to be a part of by dedicating herself to Christianity enthusiastically, with warmth and assurance'.<sup>21</sup>

In the 23 May 1946 print of the newspaper *Hangö*, Eva Slavatitsky was listed as one of the seventy-eight officers who started working during the fifty-five-year history of the Salvation Army in Hanko<sup>22</sup> (Hangö 23.5.1946).

After converting to Christianity and leaving Finland, Eva Slavatitsky married a fellow member of the Salvation Army, the Dane Jens Sørensen Jensen (b. 14.6.1873, d.

20 Sandy Fuchs – correspondence with the authors.

21 Finnish original (translation by Mercédesz Czimbalmos): 'Innokkaasti sekä lämmöllä ja wakuutuksella hän todisti siitä walosta, jonka osallisuuteen hän oli päässyt omistamalla itselleen kristinopin.'

22 Hanko (Swe. Hangö) is a port town and a municipality on the south coast of Finland.



1951). The couple married in Copenhagen in 1898 and had two children, Svend and Karin Jensen. Despite being taken from her parents, Chava stayed in touch with them. According to her descendants, her children were disconnected from their Jewish heritage. Eva lived a long life, passing away at the age of ninety in 1963.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

When looking at Helene Schjerfbeck's painting, *Fête juive / Lehtimajanjuhla*, at first glance one may think of many different things. The onlooker can, of course, ponder the work's artistic value, observe the technique Schjerfbeck was using, think about why she decided to depict the Jewish feast of Sukkot, or perhaps wonder how Sukkot is celebrated in Finland today.

Observing the two figures in the painting, one may consider their lives and the period in which they lived. Nevertheless, perhaps no one would assume that one of them had such an 'adventurous life' in early adulthood as did Chava Slavatitsky. She was most likely living a life very similar to that of any Jewish girl at the time. One may (somewhat) erroneously think that Schjerfbeck's painting granted her some sense of fame. Rather than the painting, however, it was the adventure story of her abduction and conversion to Christianity that did this.

It will never be possible to get an entirely objective account of Slavatitsky's life and the history of how she actually became involved with the Salvation Army and left her Jewish faith. Nevertheless, her involvement as a sitter and as the key figure of this problematic case in late-nineteenth-century Finland provides us with an interesting addendum to the

23 Fuchs family archive – correspondence with the authors.

cultural history of Finnish Jewry as well as a glimpse into the Jewish–Christian relations in Finland at the time. ■

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