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Searching for a Purpose of Life: conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses in Eastern Germany[1]

Małgorzata Rajtar[2]

Abstract

In most studies of conversion the term itself is used, first and foremost, to refer to changing from one 'religion' to another. This paper, however, presents accounts of conversion of former atheists and/or non-believers. In this paper I shall try to answer the question of why some people, often from an atheist background, decided and still decide to convert to Jehovah's Witnesses in Eastern Germany. What makes conversion to this religious minority a worth-pursuing option in a social environment where non-belonging to and a lack of interest in any religion is a standard and not an exception? In answering this question I focus on Jehovah's Witnesses – a millenarian movement founded in the 1870s in the United States that has been present in East Germany since the end of the 19th century. Despite the fact that established religious groups, i.e. Protestant and Catholic Churches and other religious minorities, have lost many members both during socialism and after 1989, Jehovah's Witnesses managed to retain the number of their members and thus are considered an exception.

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Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has brought many changes into lives of East Germans, and not only in a political or economic sense. Religion was yet another sphere that has undergone a radical change: public religious activity had been suppressed during socialism and was forced to operate merely in the private sphere. Hence, with the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a religious revival had been widely expected. In contrast to some Central and Eastern European countries, however, a general religious revival measured by standard sociological indicators, i.e. church attendance, trust in church, belief in God, has not been witnessed in East Germany after 1989 (Müller 2008, Pollack 2000). Presently, aside from the Czech Republic and Estonia, East Germany is considered "the most secularized region in the world" (Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003: 86, Müller 2008: 68).

During the socialist rule in East Germany, i.e. between 1949 and 1990, church membership decreased from around 90% in 1950 to 30% in 1990 (Daiber 1988, Pollack 2000). Membership of the Protestant church (*Evangelisch-lutherische Kirche*), the largest denomination in Eastern Germany, decreased from 81% in 1949 to little more than 25% in 1990 (Pollack 2000: 19). Moreover, after the unification the number of members of established churches, i.e. Protestant and Catholic, decreased; in 2000 they together constituted 24% of the population (Pollack 2003: 323). 67% of the population is considered non-believers, *konfessionslos,* (Pickel 2000: 210).

Besides, there have been many other religious groups like Methodists, Baptists, Mennonites, Orthodox Christians, Seventh-Day-Adventists, the New Apostolic Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Towards the end of the GDR, in 1984, their total number was estimated at 243,000, i.e. 1.5% of the population (Daiber 1988: 80). In the following paper I would like to focus on one of these groups: Jehovah's Witnesses (the official name of the movement is the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, in the following 'Society') – a millenarian movement founded in the 1870s in the United States. Along with the United States and Britain, Germany belongs to the "traditional heartlands" of Jehovah's Witnesses (Beckford 1975). The founder of the organisation, Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), visited Dresden and Leipzig during his first trip to Europe in 1891, and the first German branch office was established in 1903. From the beginning, the number of Jehovah's Witnesses (until 1931 called Bible Students, *Bibelforscher*) has been remarkably high in Saxony (e.g. Besier and Vollnhals 2003: 2), where I conducted my fieldwork. According to the Society's own statistics, there are 13,262 publishers[3] in Saxony (01.2007).[4] In spite of the low level of religiosity in Eastern Germany in general and the fact that after the fall of the Berlin Wall both established churches and other new religious movements rather lost than gained new members, Jehovah's Witnesses are considered an exception. The Society's steady growth remains an unanswered question.

In this paper I shall try to provide an answer to why some people, often from an atheist background, decided and still decide to convert to Jehovah's Witnesses in Eastern Germany. What makes conversion to this religious minority a worth-pursuing option in a social environment where non-belonging to and a lack of interest in any religion is a standard and not an exception (Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003, Pollack 2000: 41)? In the narratives of converts I gathered, a wide

[3] The term 'publisher' (*Verkündiger*) indicates an active Jehovah's Witness.
[4] See http://www.wachtturm.de/akt/zwv/in.htm., accessed on 22 July 2007. In comparison, of the total population in Saxony, almost 4.3 million, 924,533 were Protestants and 156,280 Catholics in 2004 (Statistisches Jahrbuch Sachsen 2005).

temporal context was covered that goes back to the late 1940s. This wide context is included for two reasons. Firstly, over a span of five years (1945–1950), the Jehovah's Witnesses were allowed to carry on their proselytising activities within the Soviet Occupation Zone.[5] As I shall show later in my paper, this was a fruitful time for the Society. Secondly, the salience of this period in the individual biographies of my interviewees (especially of the elderly generation) may only be compared with that of the *Wende*[6]. However, contrary to the fruitful time after the Second World War, the *Wende* brought far less conversions than expected.

This paper consists of four sections. In the first, a number of scholarly approaches to conversion will be discussed. The second section will provide characteristics of converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses in East Germany in comparison to other countries. Finally, in the third and the fourth section, life stories of a couple of converts will be presented.

I. On Conversion

Studies of conversion have been conducted for over a century. A domain of psychological inquiry at the start, conversion has gained a growing importance for social scientists with the "global resurgence in the study of religion" (Rambo 2003: 211) and interest in New Religious Movements. From the beginning, studies of conversion have been connected with defining its phenomenon. For a long time, conversion had been recognised as a sudden and radical change of belief; as a clearly identifiable event in the life of the convert. The prototype of this "model of conversion" was, first of all, the dramatic biblical scene of Saul's vision on the road to Damascus. Also, St. Augustine's story has served as an example of such a profound change in one's life (cf. Paloutzian et al. 1999: 1049). This "theological legacy of Christian hegemony" (Rambo 2003: 213) and Christian imagery is considered to be responsible for limiting the meaning of the word "conversion" to the above mentioned notion. Besides, the Pauline model of conversion reinforces a common assumption that converts are passive respondents to outside forces (cf. Rambo 2003).[7] Moreover, for scholars working in postcolonial societies "the concept of conversion itself retains its commonsense European connotation" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 249, cf. Hefner 1993: 4). In order to overcome this Western and/or Christian bias, Talal Asad argues that "it would be better to say that in studying conversion, one was dealing with the narratives by which people apprehended and described a radical change in the significance of their lives. Sometimes these narratives employ the notion of divine intervention; at other times the notion of a secular teleology" (Asad 1996: 266).

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[5] In September 1945, the Society was re-established as an association (*Verein*) in Magdeburg. In 1947, Jehovah's Witnesses obtained the general status of a registered religious organisation (as a sect permitted within the Soviet Occupation Zone). They were banned in the GDR in August 1950. "Freed from National Socialist persecution and liberated from concentration camps" (Dirksen 2006: 128), Witnesses again started their evangelising activities and establishing new congregations throughout the SOZ. Since many Witnesses were recognised as victims of Nazi persecution (*Opfer des Faschismus*), this helped them in their dealings with the Soviet Military Administration (SMA). Although Witnesses' religious activities were sometimes hindered by local SMA officials (Dirksen 2006), political pressure and persecutions were still significantly reduced between 1945 and 1949.

[6] *Wende* is a general term used here for the processes of political, social, and economic change in East Germany around 1989 (massive demonstrations in the autumn of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989) and 1990.

[7] This assumption – expressed as brainwashing and/or manipulation used by religious group – had become particularly vital with the resurging popularity of new religious movements in the West in the 1970s. Writing about conversion to the Unification Church (generally known as the Moonies) in Britain and the U.S. in the late 1970s, Barker thus characterises this common opinion: "becoming a Moonie must be the result of something that others do to the victim, rather than something that a convert himself decides to *do*; the victim is a passive responder, not an active agent" (Barker 1984: 6; original italics). Later on, she aptly remarks that "to assume that recruitment techniques are solely responsible for conversion is to ignore, and to leave unexplored, the difference between those who succumb and those who remain immune to Unification proselytizing" (ibid.: 8).

In many recent studies, the notion of conversion as a sudden, radical change has been abandoned in favour of a "process" approach. Conversion has started to be described as an ongoing process or even as a "passage". Lewis Rambo, for instance, writes that "complete conversion is a goal to work toward, not a 'finished' product" (2003: 214, cf. Paloutzian et al. 1999). For some anthropologists, "conversion is a form of passage, 'a turning from and to' that is neither syncretism nor absolute breach" (Austin-Broos 2003: 1). It is perceived as something that is "continuing and practiced" (Austin-Broos 2003: 9, see also Coleman 2003); at the same time, however, as "a deliberate change with definite direction and shape (…) responsive to particular knowledge and practices" (Austin-Broos 2003: 2). Others, like Rambo and Farhadian, speak about "converting" and claim that it is "the most appropriate term to signify that religious change is an ongoing complex process involving many different dimensions" (1999: 23). In the same text, they propose a seven-stage model that is meant to capture "the nature of the converting process" more adequately. These stages include: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences (Rambo and Farhadian 1999). Although the model is to be seen neither as unilinear nor as universal, it is nonetheless intended to be heuristic.

In the light of my fieldwork that consisted of observations and interviews with converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses, understanding conversion as a process rather than a sudden event seems to be more relevant (e.g. Barker 1989, Beckford 1978, Beckford 1975). It may well be that even the stage model proposed by Rambo and Farhadian is useful in some, more psychologically oriented studies.[8] Nonetheless, approaching conversion in the abovementioned vein – as a *not finished*, ongoing process or *passage* – has several flaws. The first has already been mentioned by Hefner. As he rightly points out, "conversion assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity, politics and morality" (Hefner 1993: 4). Focusing on the importance of conversion in personal experience neglects the social and political context in which every individual conversion takes place. This danger of an individualist bias has also been raised by Pelkmans. As he puts it, "that assumes that converts are atomistic actors operating in an anonymous and pluralistic religious marketplace" (Pelkmans, *forthcoming*). He further argues that such understanding is problematic in two situations: where religion is politicised or where religious affiliation is connected with ethnicity and nationality. One may add – bearing in mind the situation in some postsocialist countries, particularly in East Germany – where religious affiliation and knowledge has remained very low or is virtually non-existent. Although, as Pelkmans notices, political and social changes do not necessarily promote conversion processes, the opposite is also true. Conversion experiences are not only responses to difficult times. Nonetheless, features of conversion are socially and politically embedded and for this reason need studying.

Secondly, speaking of conversion as an ongoing, continuing process is certainly contrary to the perspective of my interviewees. As we shall see later in this paper, admitting that knowing the truth takes time, Witnesses find themselves at the end of the road. Taking into account that an act of baptism may be preceded by at least half a year of bible study with Witnesses and that prospective

[8] Or in "cosmopolitan urban environments" (Pelkmans, *forthcoming*). This is not to say that scholars do not distinguish stages in the conversion process. They are, however, not interested in the reification of these stages and/or building a heuristic stage model. Such scholars, as for instance Barker (1984) or Beckford (1975, 1978), do speak of different stages in the conversion experience. Yet, their approach is essentially sociological and emphasises a social context of the conversion, not the individual experiences of the converts.

members are generally not encouraged to rush,[9] once baptised the "conversion process" is over for them. With the baptising they confirm their commitment to God and his visible organisation on earth. As of that day they also act as representatives of the Watchtower Society in "this system of things" (i.e. political and social world). It does not mean, however, that they know everything (cf. Kirsch 2007). Many Witnesses I talked to passionately read the Bible anew and still find some overlooked or half-forgotten meanings.

In response to the abovementioned first shortcoming, Pelkmans (*forthcoming*) proposes that "instead of trying to define the content of conversion, it is more fruitful to understand the 'movement'". The act of conversion crosses boundaries and at the same time changes them. The retreat from defining conversion combined with an emphasis on its power to change seems a prudent solution for a post-Soviet world. However, in the volume edited by Pelkmans – as in many other studies – the term conversion is used, first and foremost, to refer to its basic meaning: changing from one "religion" to another. Besides, the postsocialist situation in the former Soviet Union described by Pelkmans differs from the post-GDR situation I deal with at least in two respects. Firstly, contrary to religious shifts occurring in post-Soviet Eurasia with their large number of converts "produced" in a short period by the new Christian missionaries (e.g. Wanner 2003 for post-Soviet Ukraine), the revival of religion in the former GDR is far less spectacular (e.g. Müller 2008, Pollack 2000). Secondly, close connections between religious and ethno-national categories, which are present in (post-) Soviet Eurasia, seem to be rather irrelevant in the East German context.

Among many notions of conversion, there is also one that describes conversion as a change from being a non-believer to becoming a religious believer (e.g. Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2003: 13, Wanner 2003: 276). However, as it has already been mentioned, the vast majority of studies of conversion deal merely with its commonplace understanding: changing one's religion.[10] In this respect, conversion to the Jehovah's Witnesses in East Germany gives an opportunity to explore this seldom studied notion of conversion – many converts I met during my fieldwork were atheists before.

All that said, I want to raise one point that may seem contradictory at first glance: most Jehovah's Witnesses I talked to never used the term "conversion" in order to describe their experiences. As a researcher I tried not to impose my vocabulary on my interviewees (cf. Beckford 1978). Thus, in the course of my study I learned their idiosyncratic language and we talked about "coming to the religion" (*zur Religion kommen*), "meeting the Jehovah's Witnesses" (*Zeugen Jehovas kennen lernen*), and – most often – about "coming to the Truth" (*zur Wahrheit kommen*) or "learning the Truth" (*die Wahrheit kennen lernen*). Researchers studying religious movements report similar differences between "etic" and "emic" perspectives (i.e. discourses); nonetheless they keep on using "conversion" in their analysis. For lack of a better term I will follow their well treaded, albeit not always clear, path.

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[9] In his comparison of two highly evangelistic religious groups – Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses – that share common roots and, initially, similar ideology (e.g. radical eschatology and the sense of being God's special people), Lawson notes changes in the conversion process of both groups. In contrast to Witnesses, Adventists had changed their indoctrination pattern in the early 1980s. In order to achieve the high growth rate set by Adventist leaders, converts were baptised more quickly than before (after three weeks of evangelistic meetings instead of two years of classes in Africa). Also post-baptismal nurture was neglected. This resulted in a poorer socialisation of new converts. Witnesses, on the contrary, continued to practice their intense and time consuming socialisation of converts (1995: 373).

[10] Some scholars, for instance Austin-Broos (2003), Rambo (2003), and Rambo and Farhadian (1999), do not speak of other possibilities than changing one's religion.

II. Who are Jehovah's Witnesses?

Observing Witnesses gathered in a Kingdom Hall[11] or doing their door-to-door proselytising in the streets of Chemnitz, one is presented with a picture of a highly homogenous and uniform group of people. Members of the Society are clearly recognisable: nicely, albeit a bit old-fashioned, dressed people with a smile on their lips and a suitcase in their hand. Needless to say this is also an image propagated by the Society itself. Issues of proper dress, appearance, and behaviour were discussed almost as often as maintaining high moral standards in everyday life. Although the spiritual salvation (*geistige Heilung*) is considered to be more important than the physical one (*physische Heilung*), and "spiritual food" (*geistige Speise*) more crucial for obtaining a new "Christian identity" than everyday food, appearance should serve as the Witnesses' trademark in the outside world. In this respect, modesty, simplicity, patience, orderliness, and cleanness belong to the standard repertoire. Intrigued, for instance, by the length of skirts worn by women in a congregation I used to visit (seldom knee-length, usually longer), after a short enquiry, I found out that this is considered to be "the proper length". There is no "official" rule for the length of a skirt but everyone knows what "proper" means in this context.[12]

Behind this outer image of the Society as a homogenous group of people, one may discover some disparities among its members. As Eileen Barker rightly observes, "as *individuals*, members of NRMs [New Religious Movements – M.R.] are not so very different from other people" (1989: 5; original italics). Even their "proper" skirts or dress in general indicate differences in social and material status, not to mention their personal style. After several meetings one realises that friendliness may have different faces. Not every "sister" and "brother" – as Witnesses call each other – is greeted with the same warmth and smile. Congregations in Chemnitz were also "divided into" smaller clusters of like-minded people of similar material and/or social status who spend most holidays and much free time together. Let us then look behind the curtain at social background, age, gender, occupation and – last but not least – previous religious affiliation of Witnesses.

According to Beckford, the Watchtower Society draws members from a wide range of social classes (1975: 141, 1978: 258, Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2003: 124). However, some differences over time can be noted. Firstly, the recruitment of lower-middle-class members has increased since 1945. Before 1900, Bible Students belonged primarily to the middle class; in the years 1914–18 there was a balance between middle-class and working-class followers; the presidency of Rutherford (1917–42) was marked by a predominance of working-class followers (Beckford 1975: 136, data for Britain and U.S.). Beckford's study (1975: 136) found that Witnesses (N=180) came predominantly from the lower middle and upper working class (with an emphasis on lower-middle-class; ibid, 140). In comparison, Dobbelaere and Wilson's study (1980: 95) of Belgian Witnesses

[11] "Kingdom Hall" indicates a building where (a) congregation(s) of Jehovah's Witnesses meet in order to pray, listen to public talks, study the Bible and the Society's literature, etc. There are no religious symbols displayed in or on Kingdom Halls.

[12] Of course, the notions of proper/improper in connection with appearance and dress code are highly influenced by pictures published in the literature of the Watch Tower. At congresses, in Kingdom Halls, or in street service, female Witnesses wear skirts. Feeling rather uncomfortable as a single woman wearing trousers in congregation, I changed to a skirt of "proper length" quite quickly – this obliged me to purchase some proper skirts. Needless to say many Witness women wear trousers in private. Besides, some young women are 'immodestly' dressed during congresses, particularly in the summer. At this point, I want to mention that the proper dress for a Witness man in street service is a suit or any suit-like clothing. Moreover, men should not wear any facial hair or long hair in general. They are also expected to wear loose and not tight-fitting trousers (e.g. Beckford 1975: 144–145). Change in appearance belonged to the conversion processes of many male Witnesses I talked to. However, this issue will not be discussed in this paper. Due to paper and topic limitations I shall not engage into my personal fieldwork experiences either.

(N=367) indicates that the working class is distinctly overrepresented among the members of the Society (two out of three Witnesses). Available data for postsocialist countries, e.g. Poland, does not classify Polish Witnesses according to social classes but merely to education, thus showing that 47.7% of Witnesses (N=86) accomplished secondary education (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2003: 123, cf. Doktór 2001). Moreover, becoming a Witness is not connected with downward social mobility (e.g. Beckford 1975, Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980, Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2003). Neither Belgian nor British Witnesses were less educated than the general population. In the case of Polish Witnesses, Libiszowska-Żółtkowska even states a leap in education for the post-war generation (2003: 123).

Secondly, Beckford argues that "the Watch Tower movement contains a disproportionately small number of people from social classes at society's extremes" (1975: 139–140). The richest and the poorest are underrepresented in the Society (cf. Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980).

54% of Belgian Witnesses (N=367) were women (52% in general population, Dobbeleare and Wilson 1980). In Poland, according to the available data, men constituted between 49.2% (N=126; Doktór 2001) and 38% of Witnesses (N=87; Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2003).

Among Belgian Witnesses, 21% were either born into a family of Witnesses or were children of parents who had joined the Society before they, the children, "reached years of discretion." About 5% had no religion before, 92% of those who previously belonged to another religion were Catholics and 3% Protestants. The Belgian Witnesses in Dobbeleare and Wilson's sample were younger than the general population of the districts in which they lived (84% of Witnesses were under 55 years old in comparison to 68% of the general population). Among Polish Witnesses, 29.4% were born in a family of Witnesses (Doktór 2001: 189). Prior to membership in the Society, 7.9% did not belong to any religious group and 62.7% were Catholics (Doktór 2001, 94 % in Libiszowska-Żółtkowska's sample, 2003). The average age of Polish Witnesses is 40.5 years (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2003). Let us now have a look at German Witnesses. It has to be emphasised, however, that the available data is insufficient.

In 1996, The Watchtower Society published a booklet based on a survey among 145,958 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany. This booklet, titled *Jehovas Zeugen. Menschen aus der Nachbarschaft. Wer sind sie?*[13] was addressed to non-Witnesses living in Germany. Its main goal was to present Witnesses as in many respects "normal", "average" Germans (e.g. intelligence, education, or abilities). At the same time, it stressed the advantages of living a moral life in accordance with the teachings of the Society (e.g. only 4.9% of Witnesses are divorced) and emphasised the persecution of Witnesses during the Nazi regime and in the GDR. According to this booklet, in 1994, 61% of Witnesses were female. On the basis of a diagram published in the booklet, it may be stated that the majority of German Witnesses belonged to the following age cohorts: 26–36 and 36–45 as well as 56–65 and 66–75. As was the case in abovementioned studies, the richest and the poorest are underrepresented among German members of the Society. They

[13] Like other publications of the Society, an original booklet was published in English: "Your Neighbors, Jehovah's Witnesses – Who Are They?" The survey was conducted in 1994. There is, however, no information concerning the used methodology, research institution etc. One may only suppose that the survey was conducted by the Society itself. It is worth mentioning that the booklet was published in the same year as the Enquete Commission on "So-called Sects and Psychogroups" was established by the German Bundestag (May 1996) – this, however, might have been a coincidence. By 1996, public apprehension of sects had almost turned into hysteria of collective fear and accusations made by sect commissioners, politicians, and media. Therefore the Commission was to deal with new religious movements (especially Scientology, but also e.g. some Charismatic churches, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, ISKCON, Soka Gakkai) and to identify potential dangers posed by these organisations.

constitute 13.4% and 3.3% of Witnesses respectively. Unfortunately, no differentiation between West and East Germany was made in the booklet.

During my fieldwork in Chemnitz I conducted 40 life-story interviews with current members of the Society.[14] 27 of them were female (67.5%). This high proportion of interviewed women, however, does not correspond to the gender division in the congregation I usually visited nor to that of two others I visited several times. I was able to talk to more women than men for two reasons. Firstly, as (a single) woman I was unable to talk to (single) men without the presence of other Witnesses, which was often impossible to arrange. Secondly, in many Witness families it is a woman who does the bulk of evangelising (e.g. as a Society's pioneer) and thus has "more" time; while we were talking, their husbands were usually at work.

21 out of the 40 interviewees converted to Jehovah's Witnesses (14 women and 7 men). The rest were born into the family of Witnesses or were children of parents who converted to Witnesses while they, the children, were young. Among these converts, 9 persons were atheists or non-believers before, 6 were born into a Catholic family, another 5 were born into an Evangelic family, and 1 into a Methodist family. Among those born into Catholic families, 3 were born in Poland. 2 persons born into Evangelic families were displaced with their families during World War II (from what is now Latvia and Poland). The average age of my interviewees was 49.2 years.[15]

Although my data is not based on a statistically representative sample,[16] it may nonetheless give us a better insight into conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses in the former GDR. What stands out is certainly the high number of converts from an atheist or non-religious background. As I will show in the last part of my paper, conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses during the GDR and after the *Wende* challenges conclusions based on research results in predominantly religious countries like Britain in the late 1970s. Analysing predispositions to conversion, Beckford (1975: 183) states that "not a single interviewee or respondent reported entertaining any atheistic or agnostic ideas (…). This conventionally Christian background has the effect of facilitating initial rapport between evangelist and audience through the common bond of basic religio-moral assumptions". Later on he adds that the task of publishers is to elaborate on and not to instil "the prospective convert's set of views and is therefore spared the more arduous task of defending the very idea of God or belief in the Bible's divine inspiration" (1975: 183). Contrary to Beckford's statement, my interviewees emphasised that exactly those people lacking any religious background and/or affiliation were generally more accessible and ready to listen.

III. Fruitful Words on Good Soil

A twice-monthly magazine of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania regularly publishes life stories of different Witnesses from around the world. The aim of these "Lebensberichte" (life stories), as they are called in the German edition of the "Watchtower" (*Der Wachtturm*), is to show Witnesses (but also non-Witness readers) that proselytising may be

[14] This is only the number of recorded interviews I base my analyses in this paper on. Interviewed ex-members or "interested persons" are not taken into account here. Of course, the number of interviewees whose biography I was able to learn about during the fieldwork was much higher.

[15] In comparison, according to „Freie Presse" (16.–17.05.2007) the average age in the *Regierungsbezirk* (district) Chemnitz was 45.6 years.

[16] To a certain degree, this applies to all aforementioned studies in Britain, Belgium, and Poland. Their authors emphasise that it was virtually impossible to study members of this religious community by standard techniques of random sampling (cf. Dobbeleare and Wilson 1980, Beckford 1975, Doktór 2001, Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2003).

possible even in hardest times and political and social circumstances. This is to encourage them to evangelise more effectively. A similar pattern of the story stresses a moment of conversion, difficulties that have to be overcome (usually persecution and imprisonment), the strength of family, help of the congregation in times of need, and a "happy end" (the joy arising from the ongoing preaching of God's coming kingdom). No doubt, these curricula vitæ as well as similar stories told during congresses strengthen the identity of Witnesses, both as individuals and as members of an international organisation. As it was the case in East Germany those who suffered persecution in the GDR felt deeply moved while reading the *Lebensbericht* of Rolf Brüggemeier published in *Der Wachtturm* December 1, 2006. I would like to cite a short fragment of his biography. This fragment refers to the circumstances of his mother's conversion: her first encounter with Witnesses as well as the political and social situation after World War II in East Germany.

> "Because of her church [our] mother was disappointed with religion to such a high degree that she did not want to have anything to do with God. But one day in 1949 (…) a woman stood in front of our door willing to talk about the Kingdom of God. Her questions and arguments made [our] mother curious. She started studying the Bible and that gave her new hope.
> Still, we boys were sceptical at the beginning. Great promises made by the Nazis turned out to be mere illusions, and we were disappointed with the communists, too. But despite our mistrust in every new promise, we were impressed by some Jehovah's Witnesses we met that suffered in concentration camps because they did not want to support the war." (Der Wachtturm, 01.12.06: 12; my translation)

In this form, the biography of Brüggemeier certainly represents an official version of a discourse on conversion as produced by the Watchtower Society. This is clearly visible in the usage of some words and phrases, for instance, "disappointed with religion," "disappointed with communists", and "gave her new hope." Conversion narratives and their status have been a topic of many studies. According to Wanner,[17] for example, narratives of recent converts to charismatic Protestantism in the Ukraine illustrate, "how a new 'universe of discourse' yields a common language that conceptualises problems in similar ways and searches for solutions in similar domains" (Wanner 2003: 281). Looking at conversion narratives enables her to gain an insight into "options for refashioning identity as a 'believer' and forgoing a new ideology of morality" supported by new religious communities (ibid.: 276). "Universe of discourse" is a term borrowed from Snow and Machalek (1984). They emphasise that the change, which characterises conversion, concerns not only "values, beliefs, and identities, but more fundamentally and significantly, it entails the displacement of one universe of discourse by another or the ascendance of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of a primary authority" (1984: 170). This "displacement" does not mean, however, that a previous discourse disappears, or that "specific ideologies" strictly determine the character of converts' accounts. As Snow and Machalek point out, "each prospective convert brings his or her own personal biography to the process, but this contribution is colored by the group's universe of discourse. (…) Converts' constructed accounts do vary, but the variation is around a central theme" (Snow and Machalek 1984: 176). This perspective seems to be more

[17] Wanner (2003) focuses on non-religious individuals who recently became religious believers. This makes her study rather exceptional. It is important to remember, however, that the Ukraine, where she conducted her fieldwork, has been called the "Bible Belt" of the former Soviet Union for its numerous and active Protestant congregations (Wanner 2003: 274). Hence, the context of this research differs radically from that of the former GDR.

relevant to the analysis of narratives of Witnesses in Chemnitz than Beckford's excessively rationalised analysis of conversion accounts.

In his study of a random sample of 55 adult British Witnesses from two units of an urban congregation in the early 1970s, Beckford argues that "Jehovah's Witnesses' conversion accounts should be treated as skilful accomplishments of actors who have at their disposal the official version of their movement's rationale. The Witnesses are able to draw on this rationale and thereby make practical decisions about what to include and what to omit." (Beckford 1978: 260) This (organisational) rationale, available through the Watchtower literature, may be summarised under the following headings: the Watchtower Society as God's visible organisation, as a theocracy, and as the publishers of God's intentions (ibid.: 252). Beckford claims that members of the Society not only agree with the official version of the rationale, but they also treat it as "a set of guidelines for judging the appropriateness of particular ways" of speaking of conversion (1978: 253). Moreover, he argues that an emphasis on correct knowledge and appropriate action – both controlled by the Society – is responsible for two things. On the one hand, it results in the deprivation of Witnesses' conversion accounts of intimately personal, emotional, and faith-centred features. On the other hand, it underlines cognitive matters and conformity with practical aspects of membership in the movement. Although Beckford admits that conversion narratives are not fixed and change according to different contexts and in different times, he continues calling them "rational constructions built with knowledge of the Watchtower Society's present-day rationale" (ibid.: 259). Admiring Beckford's ability to pinpoint the movement's rationale, I am rather sceptical about his conclusions. It is certainly true that Witnesses' narratives draw on the Watchtower's doctrine expressed in its publications and at congresses. Yet, calling all of them "skilful accomplishments" and/or "rational constructions" is an exaggeration. It overlooks, for instance, not only nuances of personal experiences, but also local versions of the movement's rationale.[18]

Let us look into a story recalled by a male Witness in his late sixties, recalling the time when he was a primary school pupil. His father was killed in World War II. Although his mother was Evangelic, she converted to Jehovah's Witnesses in 1948. At present, my interviewee is responsible for public relations of the Society in Saxony. He talks about disappointment and frustration with the German society after World War II from a perspective of villagers in Saxony.

> "An elderly brother (*Glaubensbruder*) came to us; uhm well, he had been imprisoned for ten, nine, about ten years, a good ten years. (…) He had nothing to complain about what had been done to him. I, being a pupil back then, still remember that. You wanna know what he told us? He told us about the new world. We are waiting for the new world and it will be better there. [About] Christ, the King and later on he told us about the resurrection. I lost my father in the war and, uhm, for my mother it was like clutching at a straw when she heard that (…) So, uhm, in 1945 Witnesses came and tell us about it; and I still remember that where we lived many were interested in it. They listened. Not everybody became [a Witness] but some did. But what was said, this was a real alternative to what people had experienced and what the future actually presented. Let me tell you what it was like, there were food ration cards (*Lebensmittelkarten*), there was almost nothing to bite. (…) It started in autumn of 1945. Series of lectures were given on all possible topics: 'what is death?' and then about the resurrection, about the 'Kingdom' and, uhm, [that] 'people will not be hungry anymore'

[18] Of course, since 1942 (with the third president of the Watchtower Society, N.H. Knorr) it has been emphasised that Witnesses participate in an international organisation (cf. Beckford 1975). This international brotherhood was also stressed by Witnesses I talked to. However, the social and political context of becoming and being a Witness in the former GDR differs from that in Britain and the U.S.

> and (…) for us these were remote beautiful things we were longing for; and many liked this message."[19]

In both – Brüggemeier's and my interviewee's – citations, some characteristics of the East German society after the Second World War are mentioned that are also distinguished in scholarly literature. They may be gathered under the heading: material, psychological, and ideological breakdown (e.g. Dirksen 2002, Hacke 2000, Weber 2000). In that situation, Witnesses were respected by many people as victims of the Third Reich (cf. Dirksen 2002).[20] Moreover, as it was emphasised by many elder Witnesses, the hope the Society offered was highly appreciated. But, preaching the hope of the new world was certainly enabled by the relaxation of political pressure and persecutions in the SOZ.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in East Germany increased significantly during that time. A man in his mid-sixties thus describes this post-war situation and concludes that "a seed of the Truth" preached by Witnesses bore fruit. As he was born into a family of Jehovah's Witnesses in Chemnitz, his account comes from the other side.

> "It is simply incredible that during the time after the war and because of the conditions it brought, many people were put in adverse situations, and they became very receptive to biblical prophecies and what the Bible says about the future. These are most of the people in the congregations, also in our congregation in Chemnitz X. Today these are all elderly people who learned the Truth in back those days. Well, that's how it is, I know some of our friends who said the war's meaninglessness and spilled blood and the behaviour of the churches raised their doubts, and some rejected God completely and said we have to look for truth. They said let's see what the Bible says. These were fruitful words on good soil."

The fruitful time, however, was short. The public's general interest combined with high rates of converts might have been interpreted as the affirmation of one's religious position. Relaxation of political pressure ended as early as 1949; already with the beginning of the cold war (1947/48) relations between the socialist state and Jehovah's Witnesses deteriorated (cf. Hacke 2000). Witnesses not only managed to increase their numbers more quickly than other religious groups; in the first place they did not show political engagement and social enthusiasm for the democratic reconstruction of East Germany (e.g. Dirksen 2006, Hacke 2000). Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in the GDR in August 1950 and again received legal recognition as a religious organisation from the state several months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in March 1990. According to Dirksen (2006), there were over 23,000 publishers in 1950 and over 21,000 in 1990.

During the GDR, abstaining from political or union activities, rejecting public referenda or elections, refusing to perform military service, and last but least, "privileges" of missionary work and attending meetings where socialism played no role raised the special attention of the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*; Socialist Unity Party of Germany) and the Ministry of State Security.[21] It is worth mentioning that the ban of the Society not only took place just before the first elections (mid-October 1950) in the newly established state (1949) but that it was also preceded by a large scale press and radio propaganda campaign. Witnesses were presented as a

[19] This and other interviews cited in the paper were conducted in German; all translations are mine.
[20] Persecution in the Third Reich goes beyond the topic of this paper. According to Hacke (2000), there were 25,000–30,000 *Bibelforscher* in Germany in 1933; about 10,000 were persecuted by the Nazis.
[21] According to Dirksen, about 6,000 Witnesses were arrested in the GDR; of these, 4,000 were sentenced to prison, 15 to life imprisonment; over 60 Witnesses died in prison, some shortly after their release from prison (Dirksen 2006: 140).

"sect under American influence" or "agents of American monopolism", suspected of spying and accused of "attempting to boycott the state" (*Boykotthetze*). Why did some people convert to the Jehovah's Witnesses in this political environment? In other words, what made conversion a conceivable option – to recall Pelkmans' question raised in the context of the post-Soviet Eurasia.

IV. Evolution versus Creation

The title of this section refers to a well known publication of the Watchtower offered to non-believers /atheists:[22] "Did man get here by Evolution or by Creation?" (1st edition in 1967) On the one hand, this book proved to be very important for many interviewees from an atheist background who converted to the movement. On the other hand, these two words (evolution and creation) stand for two ideologies: the socialist ideology of the GDR and the religious ideology of the Watchtower Society. Both share an all-embracing aspect: they present themselves as the true, the only true, way of life.

The SED leaders used the ideology of Marxism-Leninism in order to legitimise their regime. Following Lenin's statement from 1913, they claimed that the 'teachings of Marx are omnipotent, because they are true' (quoted in Ihme-Tuchel 2003: 107). Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, believe that the whole Bible was inspired by God, literally is "God's word". The Bible offers the light of the "Truth", i.e. "the true Christian faith" (*Der Wachtturm*, 15 March 2007, cf. Kirsch 2007); this biblical Truth answers all important questions in life and offers God's guidance. To know this Truth and to live accordingly 'may help us to lay out a secure course and to live a meaningful life.' (*Der Wachtturm*, 15 March 2007).

This section focuses on conversion narratives of two Jehovah's Witnesses from Chemnitz: Thomas and Anja.[23] Although both were born into communist and non-religious families and received a "typical" socialist upbringing,[24] their initial contacts with Witnesses differed significantly. Thomas, like the majority of my interviewees, was not a "religious seeker." Moreover, describing himself as "atheist" he did not even consider religion as an option. Another convert, a woman in her late fifties who converted at the age of 40 (in 1988) from an atheist background, asserted "religion, here it is again, I always thought this is like the Party, there are Ten Commandments and nobody follows them"[25] (Interview May 05, 2007). Anja, on the other hand, belonged to the few converts – both from atheist and religious background – who may be described as "religious seekers." Before meeting Jehovah's Witnesses she "hung out" with some religious groups and was interested to listen to their arguments.

Although both Anja and Thomas described themselves as coming from communist and atheist families, their conversion narratives are nonetheless similar to those coming from religious families. This is partly because the latter admitted that they had stopped believing in God at some

[22] I translate "Konfessionslose" and "nicht religiös" as "non-believers". As these two terms (non-believers/atheists) were used by my informants interchangeably I will follow their usage. In few cases, when the term "atheist" was particularly stressed, I will indicate this by putting the German term in brackets (*Atheist*).

[23] In order to protect my interviewees' identity, their names have been changed.

[24] A "typical" socialist upbringing may be, shortly, characterised as taking part in mass organisations at school (such as *Junge Pioniere*, *Thälmann-Pioniere*, *Freie Deutsche Jugend – FDJ*), and later on joining *Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft* and *Sozialistische Brigade*. *Jugendweihe* as a socialist ritual of coming of age constituted a key element of the socialisation process in the GDR. It was introduced in 1955. If not otherwise stated, "communist", "non-religious", and "atheist" are self-descriptions used by my interviewees.

[25] My interviewee refers here to the ten commandments of socialist morality and ethics (*Zehn Gebote der sozialistischen Moral und Ethik*) introduced by Walter Ulbricht in 1958.

point in their life. They were also disappointed with the upbringing they had received, albeit this was – at least nominally – a religious upbringing. Moreover, like the majority of converts at my field site, Anja and Thomas were born in working class families. Hence, their parents represented such occupations as: lathe operator, painter, baker, fitter, or they worked in a shoe factory, etc. Most of my interviewees' fathers belonged to the Party; commonly they were party secretaries. Most mothers worked as office clerks, many as wet nurses, or in factories; there were also some housewives among them. In two cases, the parents of my interviewee had a farm; two women worked at a farm. Only in one case did the father have higher education (an engineer). Only very few converts to Jehovah's Witnesses went on to the *Abitur* (general qualification for university) at the Extended Upper School in the GDR (*Erweiterte Oberschule – EOS,* comparable to grammar schools or college-prep-schools) and then went on to a university. Instead, they had vocational training and started to work afterwards. While at work, converts from an atheist background particularly continued their education at adult educational centres or took part in distance learning. It may be stated that converts are not only better educated than their parents, but they are also better educated than those born into a Witness family. The latter issue, however, is connected to the educational policy of the GDR and persecutions of religious persons in general, but I shall not discuss this in the present paper.

The Story of Thomas

Thomas, a man in his late forties, was born in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) into a working class family; his father had belonged to the Party until 1989. Neither his parents nor his brother became Witnesses. They were, as he calls them, non-religious (*nicht religiös*). Thomas is married to his second wife; he has four children from his first, deceased wife. Both women were Jehovah's Witnesses. All children were baptised. Two elder children – in their early twenties – were baptised well before I met Thomas. At the time of my research, however, they had not visited the congregation for a long time. The two younger children – in their teens – actively took part in meetings and eventually were baptised at congresses in the spring and summer of 2007. When I met him, Thomas played music with two other Witnesses during Sunday's meetings in the congregation. As the musicians played rather vigorously, songs were sung with more enthusiasm than in other congregations where music is usually played from a CD. Thomas was baptised in 1985, before that, however, he was – as he called himself – an atheist. This is his story:

> "At least my father was genuinely convinced. He wanted to do good for people and I give him credit for that (…) Well, my father advocated communism and for him anything published in the newspaper was the truth. And we as teenagers, I also have a brother, we could see the world as it was, we could see the people the way they really were and we found out that it was not like that at all everywhere. Yes. And for that reason there were conflicts. My father simply wanted us to see the way he did. And we couldn't see it like that."

According to Thomas, the discrepancy between "the world as it was" and as his father wanted to see it was responsible for conflicts with his father. His mother always supported his father and recognised his authority.

> "The reason was that you tried to be provocative; to provoke all this Philistinism (*Spießertum*) (…) well, Philistines (*Spießbürger*). I mean people who get involved for the

> regime on the surface and beneath they are completely different people. But they want to give a certain appearance. Well, that bothered me."

Torn and untidy clothes, long hair, and a conspicuous appearance made Thomas just the opposite of what his parents expected him to be. Besides, as Thomas says:

> "Well, to take part (*mitmachen*) in everything and not to stand out (*nicht auffallen*). This was actually the premise; preferably no confrontations, no controversial opinions in public, and taking part in everything quietly. This had a substantial influence on me for a time but I was not happy about it. (…) They [parents] knew already that we did what we wanted to do but nonetheless they wanted us not to stand out. Not to stand out, this was actually the most important topic. And today it's not like that with us. Unfortunately, we stand out and many cannot understand it."

After finishing his ten-year-education, Thomas did not want to go to the EOS and started a vocational training as a mechanic, and after two years "switched" to handicraft (*ins Handwerk gewechselt*). He thus describes his worldview:

> "Well, I was an adamantly committed atheist (*felsenfest überzeugter Atheist*), yes, and [this] was absolute for me. [This] was a foundation that could not be shaken by anything (…) The GDR was atheist. Yes, it means we were simply told that there is no God at all. No. And as proof of that, scientific evidence was used. Darwin as a big one. It was always said that everything had already been demonstrated. (…) And it was the same with the newspapers. I always read the newspapers my father had, I was actually only interested in scientific articles, and they all cited evidence proving evolution. So I was simply convinced."

At that time, he lived with his wife in a block of flats in a newly built district of Chemnitz. They already had their first child. Thomas' wife was an orphan and also a non-religious person. She was brought up in an orphanage and there she met an Evangelic pastor and his family who often invited her to their house. Influenced by Evangelic families she brought home some religious literature and "ideas" they used to discuss. However, contrary to Anja, Thomas was not interested in religion at all. The religious literature his wife brought home could not answer his questions, he claimed – until 1982.

> "This was unable to explain anything to me, that is, nothing that might have shown that Darwin was not right. No, it was fixed for me. And anything else, whether God or extraterrestrial, the extraterrestrial was actually more likely to me. Just think about it. Well, and that time these topics were discussed over and over questions were also clearly formulated and could not be answered, and exactly at that time the door bell rang. Two women were there who wanted to help us understand the Bible."

Thomas was actually at work, his wife had opened the door. He argues that otherwise he would not have opened the door because his parents had advised him not to talk to Witnesses (*mit Zeugen Jehovas redet man nicht*). They made an appointment; it was clear for Thomas, however, that again his questions would not be answered. Surprisingly, his questions were answered:

> "They were able to answer all my questions within thirty to forty-five minutes, also the ones concerning Darwin, among others; they did not destroy Darwin but they said 'Go to a bookstore and have a look at studies of evolution, what they start with. Not a single one starts with the first cell and how it had come to be. And what a serious miracle would it be

> that the first cell was formed by accident. Yes, this is such a complex structure.' Well, and I did it, I went to bookstores, to all bookstores and read all the books on evolution and there I always found: the first cell was formed in a primordial soup, and then the development of the first cell was described. This destroyed my evidence almost at once. Well, and it was, I was able to question the theory of evolution. (…) It became clear to me that the foundation was wrong. And after that everything was possible."

Thomas had studied with Witnesses for three years before he decided to become a Witness himself. As he told me:

> "Well, it's related to my personality. Because I wanted to know it all in detail, because I thought you had to know everything before you would make any decision. In the meantime I've realised that it is impossible to know everything."

In autumn of the second year of their study with Witnesses, Thomas and his wife decided to tell his parents that they study with Witnesses and would not celebrate Christmas[26] any more. What seemed a big feast at the beginning (Thomas' hair had been cut and his appearance had changed) quickly turned into a "disaster". After his father learnt the truth, he cut off all contact with them for several years, same as Thomas' brother who had already moved to Thuringia. When they visited Thomas' parents once a month, the father ignored them and even his grandchildren in his own house. Only Thomas' mother talked to them. Thomas argues that they kept visiting his parents only because it is what the Bible commands ("Honour your father and mother"). Eventually the relationship with his father (and brother as well) improved, albeit they do not discuss religious matters. Yet, Thomas had to face another consequence of conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses: at his workplace. Although he did his training as a mechanic, he quickly retrained as – what may be called today – an information technologist. He proudly told me that he had worked in a research team in Chemnitz that was responsible for inventing mainframe computers for the entire Eastern Block. Before he became a Witness he belonged to a "socialist brigade" (*Sozialistische Brigade*). Achieving "ideological goals" was necessarily connected with the notion of serving the *Vaterland* (native country) and the "increase of freedom". Hence, belonging to a socialist brigade also had a material aspect: after appointed goals had been achieved, its members received a bonus. As a Witness, Thomas refused to be part of the socialist brigade any longer. Nonetheless, he promised to work together with his colleagues. In return, every year he was offered a proportional part of the bonus earned by "his" socialist brigade, and year after year refused to take it.

As it has already been mentioned, many converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses I talked to were not necessarily "religious seekers." Convicted, as Thomas said, that "religion is the opiate of the masses", they often connected religion with established churches and/or political opposition.[27] They would not go to any established church; like Anja, those who went where quickly disappointed. In this respect, the Witnesses' technique of recruiting proved successful in many cases (e.g. Beckford 1975, Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980). Thus, people who were neither "religious seekers" (although they were "seekers" as such) nor, as in many cases, ever heard about this religious minority were "approached" or "found" by Witnesses. The door-to-door proselytising certainly distinguishes

[26] Christmas was celebrated even by communists in the GDR. According to my interviewees it was called a "feast of family", a "feast of joy", or – in the Erzgebirge region – a "feast of light". The celebration was deprived of any religious background and was considered a good opportunity to meet as a family.

[27] A negative role played by churches in World War II belonged to the "standard" arguments of my interviewees. Interestingly, this argument appears in both – socialist and the Society's – discourses.

Witnesses from members of the established churches. The latter do not practice it; however, as one Catholic told me, this may be a fruitful method to familiarise other people with one's religion.

Analysing conversion to the Word of Life, a charismatic group in Uppsala, Sweden, Coleman emphasises the high value of "missionizing" for its members. He argues that "the scorn or indifference of outsiders is often rationalized away by believers as merely indicating the need to increase their proselytizing efforts" (Coleman 2003: 15). Despite profound differences between charismatic Christian movements like the Word of Life and Jehovah's Witnesses (e.g. the importance of behavioural signs for the first – particularly glossolalia – as a constitutive part of the conversion process not practiced by the latter at all), the doctrines of both ascribe a crucial role to proselytising. Thus, in April 2007, I went with my informants (a married couple in their late fifties) to a one-day special congress of Jehovah's Witnesses in Glauchau and this very issue was raised there again. After telling us about his recent experiences in street service, the husband said wholeheartedly that "*inside,* everybody believes in something," i.e. in God, this is the real meaning of this sentence. He was deeply convinced of this. Even his experiences proving the opposite (i.e. non-believers he met at his workplace and while doing door-to-door service) could not influence his opinion. One may assume that this personal conviction of many Witnesses combined with the Watchtower's emphasis on proselytising drove them to evangelise even in the GDR. Besides, as Thomas said:

> "Well, when you have this conviction and there are people who are ready to hear about it, then it is simply beautiful that these arguments you have been searching for such a long time, well (…) that now that you have found them, it is wonderful to share them with others."

The Story of Anja

Anja, a woman in her early forties, was born in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz). She is married to a Witness who belongs to very few members of the Society that are self-employed: he drives a taxi. Their 17-year-old son was baptised in 2006 and was still at the *Gymnasium* (grammar school); their daughter died a few years ago in her teens – she had not been baptised yet. Anja belongs to few converts who may be described as "religious seekers." Among the Witnesses I studied – as it was the case in Britain (cf. Beckford 1975: 175) – "religious seekers" were a minority, however they are found among converts from both religious as well as non-religious backgrounds. Anja said she was born as the youngest of three children in a communist family, was a pioneer, participated in the *Jugendweihe*, and took part in the pre-military training (*vormilitärische Ausbildung*). Yet, she was never a party member. Neither her parents nor her siblings converted to Jehovah's Witnesses; they are non-religious. As she puts it:

> "Actually, I was born into a communist family; my dad, both my parents were non-religious (*nicht gläubig*). (…) In our family it was my dad who was a communist and tried to raise us according to his ideals. But he failed. (…) He tried again and again to get us to go in this direction. (…) he had good intentions; communists had – as a matter of fact – good goals. They also had, I would say, an idea of paradise, but they wanted to realise it without a creator. Yes, make all people equal and with equal laws, and everybody takes only what he needs; that was in principle the image of communism. (…) Yes, he not only followed it, he did it wholeheartedly."

The course of Anja's story reveals that her father's communist commitment led him to join the police right after the founding of the GDR. Her mother is described as a person who does

absolutely not believe in anything (*weil sie an nichts glaubt*). Thus, retrospectively, Anja describes her upbringing:

> "Well, my parents tried to raise me as a decent person, but God was missing. A relationship with God was completely missing. And you live according to principles, as somebody who does not believe, you try to do the best according to your conscience (*Gewissen*); and I say again, conscience is something (…) nobody asks where it comes from? How do I know what is right and what is wrong? This is more or less planted. And non-religious parents certainly try to raise their children as decent citizens, but not always successful. We are not always successful either."

School education of the 1970s remembered and presented by Anja had been highly politicised: "There was nothing else. There was the party and that was the only course." According to Anja, all her teachers were communists and SED members. Any believer – in Anja's class there was one Catholic – was ridiculed and called "this poor crazy person" (*diese arme Irre*) or related to the Middle Ages (*aus dem Mittelalter*). While telling me about her school years, she mentioned a topic that recurs in her narrative several times and, as we have seen, was important for Thomas as well.

> "Well, many were only followers (*Mitläufer*), I would say, but still, they were atheists. So almost nobody had any faith; you were taught at school, in biology class, that your existence is the result of evolution; and in result many people had stopped thinking."

At the age of 17–18, during her vocational training as an animal keeper, she met a woman who belonged to the Seventh-day Adventists. While doing her training, she had been living in a boarding school and not at her parents' house anymore. At that time she started to ask questions concerning, as she would call it, a "purpose of life."

> "I've always been a person who enjoys talking to all people. And also to ask them what they believe in and what is their outlook on life. And then, at some point you start asking about a purpose of life. (…) As an adolescent you also start being more critical and thinking on your own. And yes, at that time as I said, I met certain people who for the first time in my life [talked to me] about faith, about the chance that life came into being by accident, to think about it or, if there might be a higher being."

The time of intense searching lasted for two to three years. She met members of different religious groups (New Apostolic Church, Evangelics, and Adventists) and was just about to be baptised an Adventist. The following description by Anja of this "searching" process again shows the importance and recurrence of one theme: evolution.

> "Well, in principle I was searching for a purpose of life, and later on I was convinced that there might be a creator; that life is highly complicated. Well, I was not convinced by evolution anymore; and then I was looking for something that may be as close to the Bible as possible. (…) Later on I was more and more able to compare different religious denominations (*Glaubensrichtungen*): are they consistent with the Bible? This, I was told by a friend of mine, a friend who was an Adventist, she told me: always check if this is consistent with the Bible. And I have always followed her advice."

The abovementioned friend of Anja, a preacher of Seventh-day Adventists, as she is called, exposed my interviewee to religious matters. At the same time, however, there is a discrepancy

between her behaviour and biblical teachings. Although this is not in concord with the Bible, the preacher lives with another woman. Besides, as Anja found out, Adventists celebrate holidays, which is, according to her (and Witnesses), contrary to the Bible. She understood that "it [this religion] could not be the truth". She was determined to find a faith (*Glaube*) that was as close as possible to the Bible. Eventually, she started to study with Jehovah's Witnesses she met thanks to her future husband, who was a Witness. She finished her training in 1982 and in 1987 was baptised a Witness. Later on she completed her education at a distance learning school. She thus describes her study with Witnesses:

> "At the beginning you have lots of questions when (…) you don't study systematically; later you study the Bible with the help of a book. In my case it was: "The Truth that leads to eternal life" („*Die Wahrheit die zum ewigen Leben führt*"). I read it. And what was also a wonderful book: "Did man get here by Evolution or by Creation?" („*Ist das Leben entstanden durch Evolution oder Schöpfung?*") Well, this convinced me absolutely. (…) Basically, it all depends on knowledge (*Erkenntnis*). Have I correctly understood the biblical standards? This, what is promised by the Bible. And when will I be ready to apply this? This is also the thing."[28]

Anja's readiness to apply bible standards helped her to quit smoking from one day to the next. She argues that it was possible with the help of the power of God's Spirit.

At the end I would like to cite this part of Anja's story where "two big" themes, important for her and mentioned above, unite. The narrative refers to her children's upbringing:

> "You have to be convicted with all you heart. This, as I've already said, this is closely connected to the question of how life came into being. (...) For me there are a thousand arguments when I say this is a question of faith (*Glaube*) that everything developed. [It does not matter] that they say in millions years or in hundreds of millions, I believe in an intelligent power (*Macht*) that made everything come into existence. (…) Not having a faith (*Glaube*) I would not have a purpose in life either."

The "Evolution controversy" is not only crucial for Anja's and Thomas' conversion processes but plays an important role in many conversion accounts of East German Witnesses. In truth, "evolution" stands for a more complex bundle of questions concerning the purpose of life or justification of one's action and/or being. Thomas reveals, for instance, that his parents had never explained to him why he had to do things in one way rather than in the other. Hence, the importance of a book mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: "Did man get here by Evolution or by Creation?" Interviewees I talked to emphasised that this very book "opened their eyes" and raised an interest in Witnesses' teachings or even convinced them entirely. The "Creation option" propagated by the Society did not destroy or neglect scientific interests of my interviewees but rather enabled them to contextualise their scientific worldview in a religious one. Moreover, reasoning employed both in the book and by Witnesses resembles scientific reasoning my interviewees were used to in their socialisation process in the GDR. The father's newspapers that Thomas used to read and the biology classes that both Anja and Thomas had to attend, all offered scientific arguments for evolution. Evolution was thus presented as the only right answer to

[28] While analysing "denominational literary practices" of two Christian mission societies, i.e. New Apostolic Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, in Zambia, Kirsch points out that in the case of the latter "although the bible was assigned the status of supreme authority, and although all magazines ultimately dealt with biblical issues, it was the denomination's books, magazines, and tracts that were actually given priority in religious practice." (Kirsch 2007: 514)

questions about the beginning or the purpose of life in the GDR. In a similar vein, from the perspective of the Society, acknowledgement of the Bible as "the ultimate source of Christian truth" (Kirsch 2007: 515) comes as a result of a long study. Therefore it is not surprising, as Kirsch puts it, that the publications of Witnesses "can be seen as an attempt to anticipate all imaginable questions." (2007: 514) The question-and-answer model practiced and mastered by Witnesses aims at gaining the "true knowledge". One may say that for both the socialist state and the Society it was the struggle for the "truth" that was important.

Conclusion

As I have tried to show in this paper, life stories of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Chemnitz indicate that conversion can be perceived as a process. Conversion narratives seldom focus on a sudden and radical event in the life of my interviewees that was sometimes characterised as an "*Aha-Erlebnis*" (Eureka experience). Although the majority of converts I talked to were not "religious seekers" they can nonetheless be described as "seekers" in a more general sense. They had been searching for "a purpose of life" in the broadest sense of the term, hence the title of my paper. This may be interpreted as a searching for right answers, right arguments, in short: true knowledge. This searching for "a purpose of life" was necessarily situated in the broader socio-political context of Eastern Germany. Both the situation after World War II and – despite persecutions – the socialist regime seemed to 'stimulate' the growth of the Society. Although at first glance these 'early' converts seemed to emphasise rather their post-war disillusionment and hope for a better future, they nonetheless perceived their new religious community as a "real alternative" to their situation at the time. This was also true in the case of "later" converts for whom the knowledge offered by the Society was a "real alternative" to that of the state. Interestingly, there were only six among my interviewees who converted after the *Wende* – and even less if we take into account their first meeting with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Thus, one question remains: why does conversion seem to be less of a "conceivable option" after the *Wende*?

The collapse of the GDR and the unification brought many changes into lives of Witnesses (e.g. recognition by the state and the end of prosecutions, possibility of open evangelising, meeting, and building Kingdom Halls, better education opportunities). At the same time, however, political and religious freedom not necessarily resulted in higher conversion rates, as it had been previously expected. Thus, while admitting to a "religious revival" or rather a great interest in the literature and message of the Society shortly after the *Wende*, one of my interviewees says:

> "[It lasted] one, two, three years. Later it slowed down, it became everyday life and now it is like most people do not notice us any more. They see us on the street and don't notice us at all; very few stare at us or want some information. This has changed indeed. I think it has also been influenced by the perspective now that one strives for material things and also has possibilities to achieve them."

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