
SEEING MARY AND BECOMING MARIJA: TSUNEKO KONDŌ KAWASE'S BRIDGING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES¹

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The events began on the morning of Easter Monday, 16 April 1927, at 9:30 with a baptism and concluded at 10:30 with a marriage ceremony.² The woman who entered the chapel of the Bishop's Palace in Ljubljana that morning was Tsuneko Kondō Kawase. Upon exiting, she was Marija Skušek, now married to Ivan Skušek Jr., a former officer of the Austro-Hungarian navy.³ Within the span of an hour, she had changed her name and surname and received all the Catholic sacraments. Her two children from a previous marriage had been baptised the previous day and then received Confirmation on the same day as their mother.⁴

This notably swift procedure attracted significant attention from the press at the time. Daily and weekly newspapers, as well as journals, extensively covered the ceremony, publishing details about the wedding,

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² »Marija jo je poklicala [Mary Called Her],« *Bogoljub* 26, no. 1 (1928): 7.

³ Archdiocesan Archives of Ljubljana (NŠAL), *ŽA Ljubljana – sv. Nikolaj*, Poročna knjiga [Marriage Registry] 1921–1940, 137.

⁴ Tsuneko's children received a conditional baptism, because it was not clear if they had been baptised correctly in China (»Pet zakramentov v eni uri,« *Jutro*, April 20, 1927: 3; Blaž Otrin and Marija Čipić Rehar, eds., *Jegličev dnevnik: znanstvenokritična izdaja* (Celje: Celjska Mohorjeva družba, Društvo Mohorjeva družba, 2015), 967). Their father was Paul H. Schmidt, a German official in China, so the children were initially baptised in the Lutheran tradition.

including a large photograph of the couple and the guests, descriptions of her kimono, and a comprehensive list of wedding guests.⁵



Figure 1. Wedding photograph (Tsuneko and Ivan seated on the right and left side of Bishop Jeglič; Franc Kimovec stands behind the bishop). Source: Photo archive of Janez Lombergar.

Despite the overall positive and fascinated reception, the urgency of the ceremony raised questions. Numerous articles touched upon this rapid process, suggesting the need for further explanation. In January of the following year, an intriguing article appeared in the bi-weekly religious journal *Bogoljub*. Entitled »Mary Called Her,« the article presented what was purportedly a translation of a letter from Tsuneko to

⁵ *Novice v slikah*, 1 May 1927 (wedding photograph); »Izredna slovesnost v Ljubljani,« *Slovenec*, May 1, 1927, 5 (description of the photograph).

Herman Hoffmann, the headmaster of the Catholic University in Tokyo. In this letter, Tsuneko provided a detailed and deeply personal account of her conversion to Catholicism, in which of Mary played a central role. These apparitions reportedly began during the winter prior to her conversion and were pivotal in her transformation.

This paper aims to examine this remarkable narrative through various analytical lenses. First, we conduct a detailed analysis of her testimony to identify its key elements. Next, we contextualise her conversion within the broader religious landscape of interwar Yugoslavia, a period marked by increasing conversions and the standardization of conversion procedures. Following this, we turn our attention to the apparitions of Mary, a crucial aspect of her conversion story, considering their typology and possible contextual meanings. Finally, we place Tsuneko's conversion narrative in a wider framework of the interwar period and from that viewpoint explore the potential insights into the multireligious, intercultural, and transformative religious dynamics.

Mary Called Her

The introduction to Tsuneko's letter is penned by an anonymous author. The introductory passage indicates that the article was prepared by a priest who corresponded with Tokyo on Tsuneko's behalf. Based on the content of the letter, this individual is likely to be Franc Kimovec (1878–1964), the priest who played a pivotal role in Tsuneko's conversion, or someone closely associated with him who managed the formalities related to her conversion, including correspondence with the Catholic University in Tokyo. Kimovec, a renowned church musician and composer, was, at the time the bishop's canon in Ljubljana and thus also the landlord of Ivan Skušek's family,⁶ who resided in the canonical house opposite the bishop's palace.

Tsuneko begins her letter by recounting her initial scepticism toward Catholic rituals during the first years after their arrival in Ljubljana in September 1920. She and Ivan Skušek initially lived with his parents in the canonical house, and she recalls being terrified the first morning she

⁶ Cf. »Marija jo je poklicala,« 7.

was awakened by the loud ringing of the cathedral bells.⁷ She reflected at that time that if they ever found a place of their own, it would have to be far from any church. She goes on to describe her first experience attending Sunday mass, where, despite observing others solemnly performing the rituals, she »did not find it very holy« compared to her experiences in Japanese temples, where »her head instinctively knew when to bow.« With a touch of humour, she describes how, to her, Sunday had previously been the only morning to rest, whereas being Catholic required waking up early for church, even if it is raining or snowing outside.⁸ Moreover, she found the obligation to confess her actions to someone other than her husband inappropriate. For these reasons, she resisted invitations from »some priests« to convert, citing her upbringing in Buddhism as a reason she could not change her faith. This detail is intriguing, as it almost suggests that she used her Buddhist identity as a convenient excuse to avoid pressure to undergo baptism, which she resisted for other reasons. Buddhism, not requiring exclusive religious identification like Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, likely did not present an insurmountable obstacle from her original religious perspective.

Nevertheless, she continues, she sometimes felt »somewhat lonely« in her soul, prompting her to attend church services occasionally, though she remained unable to experience the »joy and comfort others felt there.« This sentiment may reflect the social exclusion frequently described in studies on conversion. She then briefly mentions that her children were Protestants before turning to the central narrative of the article: the apparitions of Mary. The »Mother of God« [Mati božja] began appearing to her »every night starting in November« of the previous year (1926) »as soon as she went to bed and closed her eyes.« Mary appeared in the »right corner of the bedroom« in what Tsuneko describes as a »living figure of the Mother of God,« »tall and strangely beautiful.« She further recalls a moment of worry over what might happen to her upon death and where she would be buried, given that her children

⁷ All the references and quotes from Tsuneko's letter: »Marija jo je poklicala,« 6–8.

⁸ The style of these humoristic segments is not unlike the rhetorics of the missionary publicism at the time and does not match the otherwise rather serious rhetorics of the letter, which could hint at some stylistic inputs by the editors, or alternatively, that Tsuneko herself had some knowledge of this type of texts in missionary publications in Slovenia.

were Protestant and her husband⁹ Catholic. Upon this reflection, she »suddenly saw the figure of the Mother of God.« In January, Tsuneko realised that Mary wanted her to be baptised, which explained why the apparitions had occurred. This realization brought her great joy, and when she shared the news with her husband's parents, his mother cried »tears like pearls.« Notably, Tsuneko does not mention her husband's or his father's reaction to her decision.¹⁰ After informing her mother-in-law, she contacted Franc Kimovec¹¹, asking if he would »guide her onto the right path,« which he gladly agreed to do. Her two children also expressed their desire to join her in converting to Catholicism.

Tsuneko then describes the religious instruction provided by Kimovec, who taught them for 2 to 3 hours daily on weekdays and at least 5 hours every Sunday, continuing this schedule until 15 April. Through his teachings, Tsuneko notes that she began »to realise with full clarity that there is only one true God« and eagerly awaited the »happy day« of baptism.

The day arrived on Monday, 18 April, when, thanks to the »bishop's kind benevolence,« the ceremonies took place in his chapel. Tsuneko does not mention him by name, but the bishop of Ljubljana at the time

⁹ The couple claimed that they had already been civilly married in China before departing to Europe in the summer of 1920. The date which is stated in the marriage register is 12 June 1920 (NŠAL, Poročna knjiga, 137). June 1920 was the month they departed from China to Europe and several documents still exist from the voyage. In all of them, however, Tsuneko is still identified with the surname Schmidt, which most probably means that no marriage took place before their departure. The date of 12 June is also quite unlikely, as just five days before that she was obviously in Yokohama, where she received the French transit visa and other travel documents for their journey to Europe (all dated 7 June). Even today, the sea journey can take a few days between ports alone, while with addition of land travel, which in the years following World War I was slow and unreliable, it is very difficult to imagine that they could return to Beijing in time for the alleged wedding.

¹⁰ The diary of Bishop Jeglič adds a dry remark on the potential reason for her not telling the husband: »This Skušek never invited anyone into the Catholic religion. I think he's not a good Catholic.« He adds that the husband later changed his mind and after Tsuneko's conversion »during the confession claimed that he was now also very happy about it« (Otrin and Čipič Rehar, *Jegličev dnevnik*, 967).

¹¹ The role of the article's author and/or the editors can only be speculated (see above), but as the preparation of the article was most probably somehow connected to Kimovec, it is also understandable that several footnotes were added (in the third person), where it is stressed that he »never dared to mention to her that she should join the Catholic Church« and that upon her decision »he only did what any other priest would do in his place.«

was Anton Bonaventura Jeglič. She explains that the »baptism ceremony began at 9:30, followed by the matrimony, confirmation, and communion during the wedding mass.« None of the guests—who included her husband’s family, relatives, and acquaintances—»prayed without tears.« In a deeply personal tone, she describes how baptism made her feel as though »her whole world lit up,« transforming her into a different person. She humorously revisits the earlier image of herself, now eager to leap out of bed and rush to church to avoid missing mass. When illness or another urgent matter prevents her from attending mass on Sundays, she claims to feel »lonely for the entire day.« In the concluding paragraph, she expresses her gratitude to Kimovec and to Hoffmann for sending her Catholic books in Japanese.

Regrettably, no such books have so far been found among her remaining possessions, and there is no further archival information about her letter to Hoffmann. These materials would shed light on other individuals involved in this unusual correspondence and provide insight into whether parts of her original letter were edited to fit the rhetorical style of the time and the journal. Thus, the letter must be analyzed »as is,« based solely on the published version, without the analytical luxury of distinguishing between Tsuneko’s original text and the published adaptation.

The details of Tsuneko’s conversion story open several possibilities for theoretical interpretation. What Rambo and Farhadian argue in their overview of views on religious conversion¹² is that it is possible to see a change in the conversion styles and related narratives in the contemporary world, with important theoretical shifts also marking the studies on the topic. Contemporary conversions, the authors claim, show a tendency to be more gradual and follow complex trajectories, the theoretical approaches to the topic also show a change from subjectivist interpretations such as those of James and Nock,¹³ to a multi-faceted and contextualised landscape of the contemporary views on what conversion means and how it can be interpreted. Tsuneko’s conversion

¹² Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹³ Cf. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902); Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

in the 1920s forms a transitional case between different typologies and views on the religious conversion, not only by the era in which it happened, but also by the characteristics of how it happened and—much more importantly—how it was narrated. Her conversion story largely fits into the framework of subjectivist interpretations, understanding the conversion as a deeply personal and individual transformative experience where emotional states play a crucial role. We see these playing out in Tsuneko's narrative when she repeatedly recalls the feelings of loneliness, fear, worry, and subsequent joy and happiness—with fear and loneliness being the decisive motivation for her personal decision to convert. The commentator of the published letter also joins the narrative framework by pointing out that she was not pressured to convert.

What makes Tsuneko's story a more transitional case when it comes to the views on religious conversion, is that the nuances of it can lead us to ask many questions about what Rambo and Farhadian would list as »contemporary perspectives on conversion.«¹⁴ First, the sociocultural context of Tsuneko's conversion is unique not only because of her individual story as the first Japanese person¹⁵ permanently residing in Slovenia but also due to the lack of a pre-existing sociocultural framework to help her or others navigate this situation. Moreover, there were not many similar narratives of intercultural contact to which she or others could refer. It is also notable due to the sociocultural context of the multireligious Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), particularly in its northernmost region, which at the time was predominantly religiously homogenous. This period marked one of the first instances of conversions occurring among the Slovenian population in relatively larger, though still limited, numbers.

In this unique situation, the individual active agency, another important marker of contemporary conversions described by Rambo and

¹⁴ Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook*, 7.

¹⁵ The complexity of her life story, though, can lead us to see her as already having a rather hybrid ethnic and religious identity even before arriving to Europe with her husband. She was born in Japan, grew up in a Japanese family in Chinese Manchuria, lived in the multicultural and multilingual 1910s Beijing, was married and had children with a German official – speaking at least four different languages and having lived in several different cultural and religious environments before leaving for Europe with Skušek.



Figure 2. Tsuneko in prayer, unknown location.
Source: Photo archive of Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

Farhadian, played a radically more important role. This is something which can be seen not only in Tsuneko's conversion narrative but also in a lot of other biographical details about how she lived her life in the otherwise very monocultural landscape of interwar Ljubljana. We also see her actively engaging in negotiations around her identity as a »Japanese woman in Ljubljana«¹⁶ and using it as a welcome entry point into social and intellectual networks. The conversion narrative seems to point to a related phenomenon—the conversion providing a solution to the realistic fears and challenges she was facing in the intercultural situation she was in. Her description of her fears about how she might be buried away from her loved ones is probably only the most severe example among many related challenges.

The religious landscape and interwar conversions to Catholicism in the Ljubljana diocese

Interwar Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic and multireligious state, therefore the incorporation of the Slovene lands into this new entity in 1918 brought many changes to this environment,¹⁷ including religious ones. From the majority Catholic Habsburg monarchy, the Slovenians—6.6% of whom were Catholic according to the 1921 census—entered a (multi-)national framework with three major religious communities: the Serbian Orthodox Church (46.6% of the population), the Catholic Church (39.4%), and the Islamic Religious Community (11.2%).¹⁸ The Serbian Orthodox Church enjoyed special privileges despite the constitutionally guaranteed equality of recognised religions.

The religious composition in the Slovenian part of the kingdom did not change markedly in numbers in the interwar period with around

¹⁶ The Slovenian press almost univocally called her »our Japanese« (Cf. »Domače vesti,« *Jutro*, July 1, 1933; »Domače vesti,« *Mariborski večernik »Jutra*«, March 6, 1935: 4, etc.).

¹⁷ Jože Pirjevec, *Jugoslavija 1918–1992. Nastanek, razvoj ter razpad Karadjordjevičeve in Titove Jugoslavije* (Koper: Lipa, 1995).

¹⁸ Milivoja Šircelj, *Verska, jezikovna in narodna sestava prebivalstva Slovenije: popisi 1921–2002* (Ljubljana: Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, 2003).

97 % identifying as Catholics in 1921 and 1931,¹⁹ but, especially in the cities, the beginnings of religious plurality were already visible in this strongly conservative milieu. Judaism and Protestantism were already present in certain regions and major cities, the latter being the largest minority religion. The religious community that gained the most visibility and converts after the end of World War I was the Serbian Orthodox Church, which soon after the unification of the country established Orthodox parishes and later, with the support of the state authorities, built the first Orthodox churches in the largest Slovenian cities, although—despite being the third largest religion—only comprised 0.6 % of population in 1931.²⁰ Old Catholicism was a new phenomenon in the area as well, while the number of Muslims was minimal in this period, although their numbers were slightly growing and comparable to the number of Jews. In the context of this paper, it is of interest that only 15 people were recorded in 1921 as being of »other religions« and none of them were women.²¹ Henceforth it can be assumed that Tsuneko was probably listed as having no religion in this census, which could give another dimension to how »uncommon« her presence was in Slovenia.

Despite the relatively low numbers of non-Catholics and the consequently lower interest in this topic by the scholarship,²² there are differences in the slowly changing religious landscape, not forgetting the importance of non-believers in relation to the Communist Party, given the events of World War II.²³

¹⁹ However, we do not have data from 1941, as the census was not performed due to the beginning of World War II.

²⁰ Cf. Bojan Cvelfar, *Srbska pravoslavna cerkev na Slovenskem med svetovnima vojnama* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, Ljubljana: Arhiv Republike Slovenije, 2017).

²¹ *Statistički godišnjak 1929* (for the census of 1921), 1933 in 1937 (for the census of 1931); Šircelj, *Verska, jezikovna in narodna sestava*, 2003; Janez Cvirn, *Boj za sveti zakon: prizadevanja za reformo poročnega prava od 18. stoletja do druge svetovne vojne* (Ljubljana: Zveza zgodovinskih društev Slovenije, 2005).

²² Zorica Kuburić and Srđan Sremac, eds., *Konverzija i kontekst. Teorijski, metodološki i praktični pristupi religijskoj konverziji* (Novi Sad: CEIR, 2009).

²³ See Gašper Mithans, »Religious communities and the change of worldviews in Slovenia (1918–1991): historical and political perspectives,« *Annales: anali za istrske in mediteranske študije. Series historia et sociologia* 30, no. 3 (2020): 415–434, <https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.27>.

The dominant Catholic Church and its political exponents have either associated the presence of »old« and especially »new« religious minorities with other, non-Slovenian nationalities (e.g., German Evangelicals, Orthodox) or publicly labelled them as very rare, inconsequential and in majority pragmatic decisions by people who have never been good Catholics anyway. However, in 1928 the Diocesan ordinariate of Ljubljana requested the municipality of Ljubljana to send them the data on conversions of Catholics to Serbian Orthodoxy as well as the reasons for the conversions, which indicates that the phenomenon did raise some discomfort and should certainly not be disregarded.²⁴ Such conversions were almost unknown in this area before 1918, if we exclude the »Away from Rome Movement« (orig. Los-von-Rom-Bewegung²⁵) of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that was limited to the German Catholics and in some form re-occurred after the Great War to consolidate the German minority within one religious community.

As proselytism—to which Catholic circles reacted most negatively—was mostly practised by representatives of religious communities from

²⁴ The Historical Archives Ljubljana (ZAL), LJU 489, box 2012. According to these statistics based on the leavings of religious communities that had to be (although were not consistently) announced to the civil authorities, in the years from 1918 to 1927, 274 people converted from Catholicism to Serbian Orthodoxy in the municipality of Ljubljana. Conversions to Serbian Orthodoxy were also the most frequent, in the interwar period reaching 1,434 conversions in the two of three Serbian Orthodox parishes in the Drava banate for which we have data (Cvelfar, *Srbska pravoslavna cerkev*, 125), followed by conversions of Catholics of German minority to so-called German Evangelical Church (in the largest of three parishes in Maribor, it is estimated that close to 1,000 people converted in the interwar period) (The Regional Archives Maribor (PAM), 1821060/2 Evangeljska verska občina Maribor 1862–1945, Izstopi iz rimokatoliške cerkve, 1911–1918; PAM, 1821060/3 Evangeljska verska občina Maribor 1862–1945, Izstopi iz rimokatoliške cerkve, 1919–1945).

²⁵ »Away from Rome« movement was a movement founded in the Austrian part of the Habsburg Monarchy by the Pan-German politician Georg Ritter von Schönerer aimed at conversion of all Roman Catholic German-speaking people in Austria to Lutheran Protestantism or, more rarely, an Old Catholic Church. It started with the introduction of the Language decrees issued by Prime Minister Count Badeni in 1897, requiring of civil servants in the Czech lands to be fully bilingual in German and Czech, which was strongly opposed by the Austro-German radical nationalists. With a few years of delay, the movement reached also Slovenian lands, especially lower Styria, resulting in 1,796 people leaving the Roman Catholic Church in the Maribor diocese in the period 1897–1914, of that predominantly German Catholics joining the German Evangelical Church (Franc Kovačič, *Zgodovina Lavantinske škofije: (1228–1928)* (Maribor: Lavantinski kn. šk. ordinariat, 1928), 419).

other parts of the country, or religious conversions were otherwise linked to ethnicity, the opposition went beyond the boundaries of the religious field. Thus, Mahnič's slogan »only a committed Catholic can be a true Slovene« came to the fore once again. That happened even in the case of Tsuneko entering Catholicism. Even the liberal newspaper *Jutro* accompanied her action with the words: »This unusually intelligent lady took this step to document her love for her family and to manifest her belonging to our nation in the most determined way,«²⁶ thus emphasizing the perception of close ties between Slovenehood and Catholicism, while also expressing some reservations if not a discomfort towards her descent at least by exoticizing her.

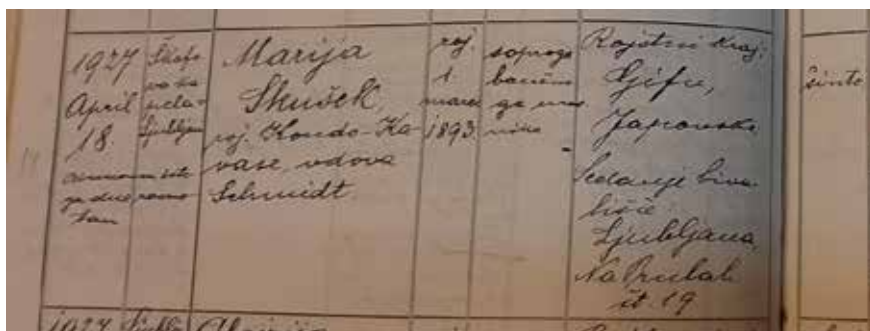


Figure 3. Excerpt from the Book of Converts on Tsuneko's conversion. Source: Archive of the St. Nicholas Cathedral of Ljubljana.

Given the religious composition, it is unsurprising that most conversions were »apostasies,« meaning people leaving the Catholic Church. However, there were also conversions to Catholicism. Even in these cases, the motives were primarily »pragmatic,« despite the requirement for religious instruction and the Catholic Church's active encouragement of conversions. Additionally, with Austrian laws still in force at the time, legal frameworks favoured the Catholic Church in such matters. Children of former Catholics between the ages 7 and 14 were not

²⁶ »Pet zakramentov v eni uri,« *Jutro*, April 20, 1927: 3.

allowed to convert with their parents,²⁷ which meant that in school they were not allowed to follow religious education of their parents' volition, but were mostly forced to receive Catholic teachings, which obviously also affected their final decision. Also in some religiously mixed marriages, even where the children did not belong to the faith of the Catholic spouse, they attended Catholic religious instruction.²⁸ However, Tsuneko's daughter, a Lutheran by her father, was conditionally baptised and received confirmation when she was still 13.²⁹ This was unusual, but not the only example of an »early« conversion that was formally initiated when the person registered the conversion with the state authorities after turning 14.³⁰

It is also unclear whether Tsuneko was indeed a widow at the time of her marriage to Skušek, since various versions of this story exist in the family.³¹ In any case, no indication was found that a specific verification of her widowship had been carried out before her marriage to Skušek.

It is possible to reconstruct concrete examples of individual religious entries into the Catholic Church at least partially on the basis of the material of the diocesan ordinariate kept in the Archdiocesan Archives of Ljubljana. Explaining the formalities that determined the procedure of conversion, but also the personal experiences of other converts, which were in many instances similar to those of Tsuneko's, but also diverged from it, gives us a necessary framework to better understand

²⁷ An interconfessional law of 1868 stipulated that the children under the age of 7 directly converted with their parents, while when reaching 14 years, the decision was theirs alone. The law had been—even if not adapted to the new situation—upheld and enforced by the courts until the kingdom was dissolved (Čvelfar, *Srbska pravoslavna cerkev*, 133).

²⁸ NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

²⁹ NŠAL, ŽA Ljubljana – sv. Nikolaj. Krstna knjiga [Baptism registry] 1896–1930, 218.

³⁰ Cf. NŠAL, sp. V, 101 Konvertiti 1938–1963.

³¹ According to the memories of Ivan Skušek jr.'s brother Franci Skušek, Tsuneko's first husband Paul Heinrich Schmidt left China in 1917 when China entered World War I and left Tsuneko a flower shop so she was then able to make her living. Due to the very common surname, the information about Schmidt is difficult to verify with greater certainty, but we do find only one »P. H. Schmidt« listed in pre-war registries of foreigners in China between 1910 and 1912 as a staff member of the German legation in Tianjin. (*The Directory & Chronicle for China, Japan, Corea, Indo-China, Straits Settlements, Malay States, Siam, Netherlands India, Borneo, the Philippines*, Hongkong Daily Press Office 1910, 1911, and 1912). In 1913 and after he disappears from the list, which unfortunately does not help confirm either of these two versions of the story.

this act. We cannot find Tsuneko there—most likely as she was accepted to Catholicism by the bishop and hence no permission or consultation was needed—still her conversion was exceptional enough to find its way into the Prince-Bishop Anton Bonaventura Jeglič's diary.³² Neither the Jeglič's diary nor the official note of conversion in the *Book of Converts*, still kept in the archive of the Cathedral of Ljubljana,³³ mentions the apparitions of Mary. Many explanations are possible: either he was not told about them, he dismissed them or the story was narrated—or created—subsequently.

A prerequisite for the initiation of the process of conversion to the Catholic Church is the teaching of the doctrine of the Catholic faith, a kind of condensed adult religious education. The priests thus found themselves in the role of evaluators, having to assess whether the convert was converting with pure intentions (i.e., the right inclinations) before the lessons even began, and later to give an assessment of the person's knowledge and moral character.

After a sufficient knowledge of the fundamental doctrines and values of the Catholic Church had been demonstrated, the priest wrote to the diocesan ordinariate for authorization to admit the candidate to the Catholic Church (authorization to absolve from excommunication or authorization to baptise or conditionally baptise the convert) and for instructions on the conversion if needed. In such letters, the priests (rarely the converts in person, but in each case, priests also gave an opinion) briefly introduced the candidates, and the converts had to fill in a declaration that they wished to be received into the Catholic Church voluntarily and with pure intentions. After receiving the authorization, the priests performed the ceremony in front of two witnesses, wrote a report on it, which was kept in the parish archives, entered the converts in the baptismal register without a serial number (if they had already been baptised), and the converts had to inform the state authorities of their withdrawal from the previous religious community. The procedure was simplified in cases where there was a risk that the convert

³² Otrin and Čipić Rehar, *Jegličev dnevnik*, 967.

³³ Cf. Archive of the St. Nicholas Cathedral of Ljubljana, *Knjiga konvertitov*.

would soon pass away.³⁴ If the bishop performed the baptism—as was also Tsuneko's case—he also conferred the sacrament of confirmation on the candidate, otherwise, the priest should have reminded the newly baptised person to receive the sacrament of confirmation as soon as possible.³⁵

As far as the official aspect of conversion to the Catholic Church is concerned, the Ljubljana Diocesan Rite was in force until 1933, and then *Zbirka obredov* (Eng. The Compendium of the Sacred Rites) for the Diocese of Maribor and Ljubljana, which is a translation of the Roman Rite, while also the textbook for theology students *Pastoralno bogoslovje* (Eng. Pastoral Theology) by Franc Ušeničnik is mentioned in the replies from the diocesan ordinariate to the parish priests asking for the directions concerning particular converts.³⁶

Religious instruction was provided through the priest, but often also on an ad hoc basis through parents, spouses in cases of mixed marriages, by attending Catholic masses, reading Catholic religious books, following Catholic newspapers, participating in Catholic religious activities, associations, etc.

As with the children, the teaching of the converts was based on the Catechism. Each priest individually judged what to give more emphasis to, determined the choice of the level of difficulty and the duration of the religious instruction. This is explained in *The Compendium of the Sacred Rites* as follows:

If necessary, [the priest] should instruct the convert until he has sufficiently understood what a Catholic must believe and how he must live. If, however, he must give the doctrines in a different order, as the education of the individual convert varies, he should not, however, omit in his teaching any of what is contained in the Tridentine Creed and in the deliverances of the [First] Vatican Council.³⁷

As expected, teaching took longer with non-Christians. Interestingly it seems that the period of 3 to 4 months of religious education

³⁴ See NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

³⁵ Franc Ušeničnik, *Pastoralno bogoslovje* (Ljubljana: Jugoslovanska knjigarna, 1919–1920), 790.

³⁶ NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

³⁷ *Zbirka svetih obredov za lavantinsko in ljubljansko škofijo* (Ljubljana: Lavantinski in ljubljanski ordinariat, 1933), 308.

was quite common for non-Christians, including Tsuneko, and the religious instructions she received from Kimovec seem to have followed the standard procedure.

More precise instructions on the teaching of converts are given in the textbook *Pastoral Theology*:³⁸

If necessary, he will speak to the heretic 'de praeambulis fidei', that is, depending on his education and his state of mind. Among the Christian truths, we must thoroughly expound especially those which the heretics suppress or misunderstand. The easiest way to teach is on the basis of the Catechism. But, priests, avoid controversy, as well as any harsh judgment of other believers. Speak to the catechumen with kindness, in warm, persuasive words.³⁹

In the case of converts from a non-Christian faith, Ušeničnik gives the following guidance:

Begin the lesson with the prophecies of the Old Testament and show how in Jesus Christ all things were fulfilled. /.../ Thoroughly explain the religious and moral truths of Christianity: the Most Holy Trinity, salvation, the Church, the sacrifice of the New Testament, the sacraments, the commandments, sin, grace. The main formularies: The Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the Divine and Ecclesiastical Commandments, the formulary for the renewal of repentance, faith, hope and charity must be memorised from the Catechism. Instruct him also to prepare for Holy Baptism by an immaculate life, by prayer and good works, by repentance of the sins he has committed up to now. He must have a firm will to live a good Christian life after Holy Baptism. Finally, the priest also explains the rites of Holy Baptism.⁴⁰

In religious ritual and teaching, differences between the Catholic faith and other Christian faiths are highlighted, such as the interpretation of the Trinity of God, papal infallibility, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the existence of the purgatory, the indissolubility of marriage, the seven »true« sacraments, the veneration of saints and their images, the recognition of the stipulations of all councils, and the understanding of Scripture solely as interpreted by the Catholic Church.⁴¹ These »truths« are particularly emphasised in the teaching of converts

³⁸ Ušeničnik, *Pastoralno bogoslovje*, 782–790.

³⁹ Ibid., 783–784.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 789.

⁴¹ *Zbirka svetih obredov*, 310–311.

from Protestantism, the Old Catholic Church or Orthodoxy. There was no manual in the Slovenian language dedicated specifically to converts—there was no need for it, given the small number of converts.⁴²

The whole process of conversion was intended to ensure that the converts would remain Catholics until death, which is what they committed to. The convert was also assigned a spiritual guide, most often a priest, who welcomed him/her into the Catholic Church, who was to encourage them to practise »fidelity and to good works worthy of a Catholic«⁴³ and to watch over them »so that he does not go into the society where it would be dangerous for him, who is not yet established in the faith«.⁴⁴

In the Catholic Church the ritual of conversion—accepting new members of other religions—is precisely defined and can be performed in three ways:

- 1) Baptism, which, as »the sacrament of rebirth, cleanses all« in which case there is no need for confession or absolution.
- 2) Conditional baptism, i.e. in cases where, despite investigation, the priest was not sure if baptism had been performed and it was not possible to obtain reliable confirmation, or finds or suspects that the baptism was not valid (e.g., as was often the case with Jewish conversions during World War II)⁴⁵. The converts had to renounce the error and make a profession of faith, the priest conditionally baptised them, conditionally absolved them from ecclesiastical penances, then sacramentally confessed them and granted conditional sacramental absolution.
- 3) When it was certain that the baptism was valid, the converts—or reconverts—renounced the error and professed the faith; then the priest absolved them from ecclesiastical penalties, confessed them, and granted them sacramental absolution. (Re)converts

⁴² Contrary to some German editions, such as: Franz Bitter, *Konvertiten-Unterricht. Praktische Anleitung zur Unterweisung oder zum Selbstunterricht im Glauben der heiligen katholischen Kirche für solche, die zu ihr übertreten wollen* (Dülmen: Laumann Verlag, 1921), a manual that was recommended to the priests also by F. Ušeničnik.

⁴³ NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

⁴⁴ Ušeničnik, *Pastoralno bogoslovje*, 790.

⁴⁵ NŠAL, sp. V, 101 Konvertiti 1938–1963; Arhiv župnije Marijinega oznanjenja [The Archive of the Annunciation of Mary parish], Knjiga konvertitov.

were also required to make extra-confessional penances, such as charitable work. The penance required was particularly strict for reconverts, but no religious instruction was necessary.⁴⁶

The first mode of conversion was open to non-Christians, in this area these were mostly Muslims and Jews.⁴⁷ It has already been mentioned that in these cases the teaching was most thorough and lengthy, as these persons were mostly unfamiliar with the Catholic faith. Priests, according to Ušeničnik, were even more careful in assessing the motives for conversion of these converts.⁴⁸ There is a case from 1938 where a Muslim was taught by a priest for four months.⁴⁹ A year later, a well-off Jewish woman originally from Heidelberg, who wanted to convert and marry a Catholic, was praised by the parish priest in Bled as being so far advanced in her studies that she »knew almost the whole of the Small Catechism by heart«. The convert also asked if she could be baptised, confirmed, and given communion by Bishop Gregorij Rožman in the chapel of the Bishop's palace, and the priest signed »a certificate of sufficient knowledge of the Catholic faith«. ⁵⁰ The similarity with the case of Tsuneko is apparent.

Which Mary appeared?

Despite the apparent regularity of Tsuneko's conversion procedure, the Slovenian press repeatedly stressed how rapid the ritual was, perhaps simply due to the fact that Tsuneko was—compared to the converts mentioned above—a rather well-known public figure, which contributed to the conversion reports being more sensationalistic. Nevertheless, the *Bogoljub* article published early the following year was set to dispel any remaining doubts about the motivation and justification of her conversion. Tsuneko's account of Mary's apparition served as valuable proof that her conversion was a result of an unquestionable spiritual transformation.

⁴⁶ *Zbirka svetih obredov*, 308–309. NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

⁴⁷ NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

⁴⁸ Ušeničnik, *Pastoralno bogoslovje*, str. 789.

⁴⁹ NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

⁵⁰ NŠAL, sp. V, 100 Konvertiti 1874–1938.

At the time that Tsuneko had her experiences of Mary's apparition, this phenomenon was already widely present in the discussions about popular aspects of religion in the European context, especially following the famous apparitions in Fatima in Portugal which occurred just a decade before.⁵¹ Mary's status of the *mediatrix*, an intermediary between people and God was also a matter of vivid debates from the late 19th century onwards.⁵² Mary's apparitions go back to the times of antiquity and were present in Medieval Europe, but took on a large-scale socio-cultural framework in the times of counter-reformation. The popularity of many of the 16th and 17th-century apparitions, the Guadalupe being the most prominent example, were providing welcome support for the Catholic cause in their struggle with the reformation.⁵³ The early 19th century, and especially the apparitions of Mary in the Chapel of Sacred Heart of Jesus in Paris⁵⁴ in 1830, mark the beginning of »the Age of Mary«,⁵⁵ where the Marian phenomena run parallel to the enormous new complex changes in the social, cultural and political realities of that time. After the Paris apparition, the apparitions of Mary became more numerous than ever before,⁵⁶ with La Salette in 1846, Lourdes in 1858, and many others. The Lourdes apparitions occurred just four years after Pope Pius IX issued the apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The doctrine claimed that Mary was preserved from both original and actual sin in becoming the mother of Jesus, what was popularly seen as an honour

⁵¹ E.g. an interesting short mention about how these phenomena are becoming more prominent as »far from the noise of the world, the Mother of God, Mary, chooses the places where she wants to grant special graces to miserable humanity« was published in another issue of *Bogoljub* in autumn of the same year (»Iz življenja cerkve [From the life of the Church],« *Bogoljub* 26, no. 11 (1928): 259.

⁵² Gloria Falcão Dodd, *The Virgin Mary, Mediatrix of All Graces: History and Theology of the Movement for a Dogmatic Definition from 1896–1964* (New Bedford: Academy of the Immaculate, 2012).

⁵³ Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (Toronto: Random House, 1996), 183–224.

⁵⁴ Today, the chapel bears a name Chapel of our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

⁵⁵ Deirdre de la Cruz, *Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions and the Making of a Filipino Universal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 7–8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

given to Mary.⁵⁷ In the decades following the Apostolic Constitution, another previously sporadic practice gained a new prevalence. In July 1876, with the approval of Pope Pius IX, the image of Our Lady of Lourdes was formally crowned, sparking a wave of similar coronation ceremonies at numerous pilgrimage sites across France and more broadly throughout Europe.⁵⁸

This brings us back to Mary's apparition recorded by Tsuneko Kondō Kawase. In her account, Mary appearing to her in the corner of the bedroom does not have many specific features. In the letter itself, Tsuneko only describes her as »tall and unbelievably beautiful.« Interestingly, a slightly more detailed description is then provided in the footnote, written by the unsigned author of the article, which adds a more detailed description Tsuneko allegedly gave »upon being asked by the reporter.« The description is not much more thorough but still provides some important details. »She never took her eyes off me.« Tsuneko's description begins, »She was all adorable and tall and incomprehensibly beautiful.« She adds that she does not know what Mary was wearing, because she always looked into her beautiful face and her eyes, so she only saw her »somehow above the knees.« She finishes the description, reported by the author, with a surprisingly firm statement: »What I know for certain, is that she was wearing a crown.« This little detail strongly stands out in her otherwise vague and dreamy account of apparitions.

As Deirdre de la Cruz points out in her exploration of the images of Mary in the Philippines, an important difference should not be overlooked when reflecting on the images of Mary in different contexts and with different cultures, a difference which can also be described in the terminological scope between the term »Mary's« and »Marian«. When speaking about »Mary's apparitions« or about »Marian apparitions«, the Marian presupposes a universality of this holy personage. Simply put,

⁵⁷ Chris Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 505.

⁵⁸ Cf. Claude Langlois, »Liturgical Creativity and Marian Solemnity: The Coronation of Pilgrimage Virgin Maries in France (1853–1964),« in *Marian Devotions, Political Mobilization, and Nationalism in Europe and America*, ed. Roberto Di Stefano and Francisco Javier Ramón Solans (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

it views all apparitions as being a series of the same universal »Marian« apparition. The opposite view would stress what de la Cruz calls »highly place-specific Mary«, an apparition which is essentially grounded in the local, cultural and personal specificity of the seer and the community.⁵⁹ From another perspective, Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, in her book *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje*, comes to a similar conclusion. She claims that the appearance of Mary in a specific place at a specific time reflects the social and cultural dynamics that frame the visionary's understanding of the apparition.⁶⁰ In his detailed theological study on this topic, Christopher John Maunder interestingly describes this duality by saying that through the providence of God the objective existence of Mary when present in a subjective apparition is clothed in subjective material.⁶¹

The specificity of the Mary's apparition described by Tsuneko therefore can be understood to reveal some of the locally and personally specific traits. However, of the whole description, the only decidedly specific part seems to be the firm claim that Mary definitely wore a crown. The crowned Our Lady of Lourdes was well known to Slovenian Catholic readership,⁶² but this Tsuneko's »subjective material« in her vision of Mary could also be reflecting some other sources specific to her personal context.

Tsuneko was Japanese by birth, but the scarce evidence we have of her early years⁶³ shows that already as a child she moved with her parents to the northern Chinese region of Manchuria, more precisely in the Kwantung Leased Territory at the tip of Liaodong peninsula in today's Liaoning province. As a young adult, she already lived in Beijing. It is

⁵⁹ De la Cruz, *Mother Figured*, 7.

⁶⁰ Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 25.

⁶¹ Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 359.

⁶² The popular account on the Lourdes case, *Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, written by Henri Lassere in 1869, was translated to Slovenian and published with great success in 1881. Cf. Fran Levec, »Lurška Mati Božja,« *Ljubljanski zvon* 1, no. 9 (1881): 576.

⁶³ The only source for her early life are two framed photographs (with photo studio markings) of Tsuneko and her parents kept in the archive of Slovene Ethnographic Museum. One, taken in Gifu, Japan, shows Tsuneko as a small child, the second one, taken already in the Kwantung Leased territory, shows her in early teenage years.

therefore possible to claim that any potential previous experience she might have had with the Catholic religion before her arrival to Ljubljana would mostly be marked by Catholicism in China. The image of Mary in the context of Catholic communities in China is a complex topic on its own, but the figure of Mary most often associated with it is Our Lady of Sheshan (佘山圣母). Sheshan near Shanghai used to be a Buddhist sacred mountain with a monastery and a temple of (female-figured) Guanyin, the bodhisatva of Mercy.⁶⁴ After the Buddhist complex was destroyed by the Taiping rebellion in 1860, Jesuits bought land there and erected a small chapel dedicated to the Our Lady of Victories. In 1870, when saved from the occurring massacres, Jesuit father Agnello Della Corte made a vow to build a church and then first built it in 1873. The church was dedicated to Mary Help of Christians, and the hill became an important pilgrimage site.⁶⁵ The sculpture of the Sheshan Mary was still based on the altar statue of crowned Mary in the Paris church of Our Lady of Victories, replaced in 1935 by a completely different sculpture of Mary holding baby Jesus above her head and standing upon a dragon.⁶⁶ When Tsuneko was in China, the original Sheshan Mary was the most venerated image of Mary by the Chinese Catholics.

But apart from the Sheshan Mary Help of Christians another crowned Mary could be the source for the specificity of Tsuneko's vision. In 1907 another crowning event happened in Slovenia, at the pilgrimage site in Brezje, where the Mary Help of Christians Basilica attracted pilgrims since the miraculous healings that first happened in 1863. A 17-year-old girl was said to be healed in Mary's chapel in Brezje. Among the witnesses of these events was a 13-year-old boy from the nearby village of Begunje⁶⁷ who later went on to become the bishop of Ljubljana, no other than the already mentioned Anton Bonaventura Jeglič. Jeglič was also the main advocate of the crowning, while the

⁶⁴ Imagery of Guanyin was often reflected in the imagery of Mary and vice versa.

⁶⁵ Thomas Coomans, *Missionary Spaces: Imagining, Building, Contesting Christianities in Africa and China, 1830s-1960s* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024), 55–56.

⁶⁶ Benoît Vermander, Liz Hingley and Liang Zhang, *Shanghai Sacred: The Religious Landscape of a Global City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 70.

⁶⁷ Robert Bahčič, ed., *Po Mariji podarjene milosti* (Brezje: Romar, 2014), 24.



Figures 4, 5 and 6: The origin and development of the old Sheshan Mary image (the statue from the Paris church of Our Lady of Victories; a postcard of the old Sheshan Mary from the middle of the 20th century; the current statue inside the Sheshan Basilica). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

permission for this special honour was then granted by Pius X in June 1907. In the special article announcing the upcoming coronation in Brezje, *Bogoljub*⁶⁸ compared the coronation in Brezje with two similar events when images of Mary were coronated in two important churches in the region, the 1715 coronation of the Mary of Trsat and the 1717 coronation of Mary at Sveta Gora near Gorica. The 1907 coronation in Brezje was, interestingly for our study, led by bishop Anton Bonaventura Jeglič himself, while the music for the ceremony was organised and partly also composed by no other than Franc Kimovec. The significant contact Tsuneko had with these two dignitaries during her conversion process—Kimovec, notably, being the first priest she approached after her visions—both of whom were deeply devoted to the image of the crowned Mary in Brezje, may have influenced how her vision was expressed in language and narration.

⁶⁸ »K slavnosti kronanja Marijine podobe na Brezjah,« *Bogoljub* 5, no. 9 (1907): 266–271.



Figure 4. Crowned Mary's image in Brezje. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Conclusion

Whether the specific apparition of Mary seen and described by Tsuneko was indeed influenced by one or the other image of Mary is, of course, outside the scope of this research as we also do not know if the published conversion narrative that included presented apparitions was indeed genuinely hers or was already modified by the unknown author. It does however shed some light on how complex the process of conversion from one (or more) cultural context to another was for an individual like her, bridging the different religious and cultural frameworks of Europe and East Asia while also negotiating different languages and imagery in which these different religious realities were presented. In this complexity, her experience was indeed very unique. At the same time, her conversion is not as unusual as it might seem. The diverse cultural contexts of several converts, including those who had little or no knowledge of the Slovenian language and who could not read the Latin alphabet (e.g., Russian refugees), often required a good deal of adjustment on the part of the priests who introduced the converts to the new faith, and yet a non-European convert was a true rarity. Tsuneko's conversion followed a common procedure, although most converts typically received only baptism on the same day. However, having the opportunity to receive the sacraments alongside her children in the bishop's chapel was a special privilege, likely due to their close relationship with Franc Kimovec. In this aspect as well as in many other ways, we see her conversion as importantly marked by her social network and the environment she lived in.

The uniqueness of Tsuneko's conversion story lies unmistakably in her account of the apparitions of Mary. This narrative not only provided her with an irrefutable foundation for her decision to convert but also allows us to comprehend the complex realities she navigated through her conversion experience.

Having already been shaped by numerous intercultural and interreligious encounters, she actively engaged in negotiating her intricate circumstances, even initiating the conversion process partly in opposition to what appears to have been her husband's sentiment. While adhering to the established conversion protocol, her narrative

reveals elements of personal agency within the rigidity of the prescribed structure. This dynamic is similarly evident in her account of the apparitions, where the codified narrative trope is interwoven with unexpected personal reflections. The Mary she envisioned is simultaneously archetypal and uniquely personal. She interpreted the paradigmatic vision of Mary as addressing her deepest fears and offering a resolution, yet she also individualized it to align with both her foundational framework of Catholic imagery in Asia and the preferred representations of her new religious mentors—thus bridging religious and cultural divides through the narration and interpretation of her spiritual experience.

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