

Migration as Mission: Alojz-Alexis Strýček SJ in Belgium (1938–1945)

Wim Coudenys

KU Leuven

wim.coudenys@kuleuven.be

This article presents a case study of Alojz-Alexis Strýček SJ, a Slovak Jesuit in Belgium during World War II, to examine the complexities of migration, identity, and religious mission within turbulent historical contexts. Strýček's experiences challenge conventional categorizations in migration studies, demonstrating how individual narratives can intersect with and transcend national and religious boundaries. The study employs social network analysis and philological-historical methods, offering insights into the dynamic roles migrants play in the circulation of knowledge and in shaping transnational connections. Strýček's case highlights the importance of considering non-national factors, such as religious affiliations, in understanding migration patterns and migrant identities. This research contributes to the emerging field of "migrant knowledge," which focuses on the role of migrants in global knowledge exchange and the redefinition of identities in times of crisis, thereby enriching our understanding of the multifaceted nature of migration.

Keywords: Jesuit mission, World War II, Belgium, migration, identity, transnationalism, religious mission, Russian emigration, Soviet Union

Introduction

The emergence of new independent nation states in Central and Eastern Europe after World War I challenged the categorization of the inhabitants of the region. People who were born in Warsaw or Prague before 1918 and had been registered as Russian or Austrian citizens all of a sudden became Poles or Czechoslovaks. This was not only reflected in the paperwork documenting individual identities¹ but also in official statistics. Whether a person identified with his or her new categorization was of little or no concern to the administration managing the documents or to the statisticians who processed data on behalf of governments.² This has serious consequences for migration studies, which usually build on these individual and collective data to define their object of study. These

1 See Caplan and Torpey, *Documenting Individual Identity*.

2 See, for example, *Annuaire statistique de la Belgique et du Congo Belge*, 66. Cf also Coudenys and Rappoye, *Fallen far from the Fatherland*, 8.

categories often fail to capture identifying features or circumstances that drive individuals to migrate, and individuals do not necessarily identify with the migrant community to which they are documentarily and statistically assigned.³ Nor does this paperwork take into account non-national, e.g. religious or transnational migrant communities, the non-binary character of individuals who play different roles in different (migrant) settings, or the possibility that an individual, through his or her actions, may change the outlook of a migrant community (e.g. among nationals without a fatherland) or serve as a catalyst for the emergence of hitherto unknown (migrant) constellations.

This contribution focuses on an individual who at the time of his arrival in Belgium in 1938 was registered as a Czechoslovak citizen but who himself did not identify with that country's migrant community (if one existed at all). Moreover, his time spent as a migrant in Belgium was guided by a religious mission that barely acknowledged national identities.⁴ However, the fact that this individual did not fit the existing (formal) categories does not mean that he was not a migrant. He effectively built his own network, which constantly shifted and grew and which was religious and transnational by definition, and he ignored the (politically) imposed barriers between local and foreign. Not only do the circumstances of this individual's life challenge the usual categories of migration history, but the shift of focus to an individual is also unlikely to provide direct insights into the concerns or cultural identity of the migrant community as a whole. On the contrary, this case risks being downplayed as a case study, biography, microhistory, or, even worse, hagiography or *petite histoire*. Last but not least, there is the additional peril of blind spots, as the absence or elusiveness of sources cannot be papered over by massive data and general tendencies.

To tackle these challenges, I use a methodology that has proven effective in my previous biographical and prosopographical research.⁵ It essentially combines social network analysis with the philological-historical method, with texts (sources) themselves as evidence and products of networks of authors, readers (addressees), themes and topics (hi-stories), references, and forms of intertextuality. Texts can always be read as 1) products and tools of the social networks from which they emerge and 2) references to other texts.

3 See Beyers et al., "Families, foreignness, migration." For a problematization on the basis of the Ukrainian community in Belgium, see Venken and Goddeeris, "The Nationalization of Identities."

4 Kennedy, "Religion, Nation, and European Representations of the Past."

5 E.g. Coudenys, "A life between fact and fiction"; Coudenys, "A. V. Amfiteatrov's Stena plača i stena nerušimaja"; Coudenys, "Fictional, but Truthful"; Coudenys, "A Failed Apostolat de Press."

The lack of sources imposes limits on what can be known, but insights into textual interconnections may yield additional information concerning social interconnections. This approach is particularly appropriate within the field of *Migrant knowledge*, a new paradigm on the crossroads of migrant studies and the history of knowledge that focuses on the roles of migrants in the circulation of knowledge.⁶ This is exemplified by the present case of Alojz or Alexis (Aleksei) Strýček in Belgium.

Alojz Strýček

In 2009, Alexis (Alojz) Strýček (1916–2013), a French Jesuit of Slovak origin, committed his memories to paper. For ages, he had been entertaining friends, colleagues, and visitors with numerous stories about his adventurous life, and he finally gave in to their urgings to put the story of his life in writing. His autobiography in Russian (his Russian was allegedly better than his native Slovak, even if it was not his first language)⁷ opens with a passage in which he identifies himself: he was born to a Slovak-speaking family in the Austrian-Hungarian village of Cserne (now Čierne, on the Slovak-Polish border), but only after the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and the ousting of the Hungarian administration did the Strýčeks acknowledge their Slavic, i.e. Slovak identity. First and foremost, the Strýčeks were Roman Catholics. Alojz was named after the saint of his birthday (Aloysius Gonzaga, June 21), and he regularly attended mass, served as an altar boy, said his bedtime prayers, read religious literature, and saw how his (well-to-do) parents engaged in charity.⁸ In the French (adapted) edition of his memoirs (2013), however, the stress is on Strýček being multilingual (Slovak, Czech, German, Latin, French) and well-travelled from a very young age.⁹ The differences between the two editions can be explained by the difference in the target readership: the Russian version addressed the tiny community of Catholics in Novosibirsk, where Strýček was living at the time of publication, whereas the French version, edited by Strýček's former language teaching assistant after his

6 Westermann and Erdur, "Migrant Knowledge." Cf. also Warditz and Coudenys, "Slavic Studies as Migrant Knowledge."

7 Simon, *Pro Russia*, 469; Simon, "Slováci v Russicu: 1929–1940" (unpublished article, with thanks to Dr. D. Černý, Director of the Slovak Institute in Rome).

8 Stricheck, *Autobiografija riadovogo jezuita ottsa Alekseia Strichecka*, 4.

9 Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 20–22.

death, was meant for a larger, non-religious French readership. Both editions agree that languages, mobility, and Catholicism indeed defined Strýček's life.

In 1926, at the age of ten, Alojz was sent to the gymnasium in Trnava and later to the schools in Nitra and Trenčín, where he graduated in 1934. As he noted in his autobiography,

During his last class, the priest read us a letter from the Pope. It said that the Soviets were destroying the Catholic clergy, and that we had to prepare for the moment "when Russia would open up," and that in Rome a seminary had been founded, the "Russicum," to train future priests. In Slovakia, we were "panslavists" and saw in Russia the future of the Slavs.

During the graduation party, I declared that I would go to Rome. To give it a try. If I didn't like it, I'd come back. To non-Catholics, you have to explain that priesthood is considered the ideal in the life of a Catholic. In Sunday homilies there was always talk about "vocation," i.e. the call to follow Jesus Christ. Celibacy, the unmarried status, is obligatory if you want to take up the priestly status, but at the same time it also gives it its aura. Five of my classmates ended up becoming priests.¹⁰

The Russicum, a preparatory college for Catholic priests destined for missionary work in Russia and among Russians abroad, had been established in 1929 by the papal encyclical *Quam curam*, the very "letter" the priest had read to his pupils in the gymnasium in Trenčín.¹¹ It was the latest instalment in the "Russia policy" of the Holy See.¹² This policy was part of the Church's battle against modernism, which found form, for instance, in the secular nation state as the nucleus of international relations. To counter the demise of religion in public life as of the end of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church increasingly stressed its divine and universal character, which was epitomized by a steep increase in missionary work and the idea that Christians should unite against secularism.¹³ From the Roman Catholic point of view, the latter implied the "reunion" of the Christian Churches, notably the Oriental ones, with Catholicism, i.e. their conversion and submission to the Church of Rome.¹⁴

10 Stríček, *Autobiografía*, 7; Cf. Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 24.

11 *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 21, no. 13 (1929): 577–81. [d.d. 15/8/1929]

12 Pettinaroli, *La politique russe*.

13 Green and Viaene, *Religions Internationals*; Lamberts, *The struggle with Leviathan*; De Maeyer and Viaene, *World Views and Worldly Wisdom*.

14 Cf. Lease, "Vatican foreign policy and the origins of Modernism."

The first step in this process had been Leo XIII's papal encyclical *Orientalium Dignitas* (1893), which proclaimed that the Oriental rites of the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin rite were equally valid and should be maintained. The latter implied the prohibition of Latinization, the creation of Eastern rite seminaries, and the study of Eastern theology.¹⁵ To further this eastern policy, on May 1, 1917, Benedict XV created the Congregation for the Eastern Church and on October 15, 1917 the Pontifical Oriental Institute. With regards to Russia, the Vatican seized the opportunity offered by the freedom of religion in the Russian Empire (1905–1906, reconfirmed after the February revolution of 1917)¹⁶ to (re-)establish Catholic dioceses in Russia, both of the Latin and Eastern rite (Greek Catholics, i.e. Uniates). Even after the Bolshevik takeover, the Holy See attempted to secure Catholic interests in Soviet Russia. Its efforts were in vain, however. As an alternative, the Catholic Church heavily invested in charity to gain sympathy among the (traditionally hostile) Russian Orthodox, either in Russia itself through food relief during the famine of 1921–22 or among Russian refugees (*émigrés*) by providing material, educational, and spiritual support. Especially during the pontificate of Pius XI (1922–1939), Russia and the relationship with Russian Orthodoxy became a hot topic, with the creation of the Pontifical Commission Pro Russia (1925) within the Congregation for the Eastern Church and further encyclicals stressing the importance of unity among the Christian Churches and the primacy of the Catholic Church therein (*Mortalium Animos*, 1928), as well as the importance of the teaching of Oriental liturgy and culture in Catholic universities and seminars (*Rerum Orientalium*, 1928). The latter led to the creation of the Collegium Russicum, the management of which was entrusted to the Jesuit Order.¹⁷

The 18-year old Alojz Strýček arrived in Rome on October 17, 1934. By that time, the Russicum had more or less established itself. It provided lodging for some 30 students and trained them in Russian culture and the Eastern rite, as these were considered the shortest way to the hearts of the Russians. Moreover, the Russicum's first rector, the Slovak Vendelín Javorka (1882–1966), who probably had been responsible for the promotion of the Russicum in Slovakia, had been succeeded by the Frenchman Philippe de Régis (1897–1954). Notwithstanding

15 https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/la/apost_letters/documents/hf_l-xiii_apl_18941130_orientalium-dignitas.html. On the history of Unionism, see Aubert, *Le Saint-Siège et l'union des Églises*; Fouilloux, *Les catholiques et l'unité chrétienne*; Baumer, *Von der Unio zur Communio*.

16 Pettinaroli, *La politique russe*, 52–55, 257. Cf. Stryček, “La révolution de 1905 et les libertés religieuses.”

17 Simon, *Pro Russia*; Pettinaroli, *La politique russe du Saint-Siège*.

his good relationship with the Slovak Jesuit Province (Provincial Rudolf Mikuš, 1884–1972) and the Slovak dioceses (Bishop Karel Kmetko of Nitra, 1875–1948), de Régis was not keen on “too large a group of Slovaks (or for that matter any group of non-Russian foreigners gaining a majority).”¹⁸ Strýček became one of the twelve Slovaks who studied at the Russicum in the interwar period,¹⁹ and he liked it there: “I never returned home. However much I loved my father, mother, and sister and however much I was loved by them, I followed the often repeated words of Christ that I now heard inside me: ‘follow thou me’ (Matthew 8:22).”²⁰ On September 8, 1936, after two years in the Russicum (and two years of philosophy at the Gregorian University), Strýček entered the Jesuit Order.²¹ De Régis was delighted:

Regarding the religious spirit [in the college], we thank God that everything seems to be going well. On the occasion of F. Wetter [Gustav Wetter, 1911–1991] and F. Strýček entering the novitiate, we could note how well and sympathetically the students were disposed towards the Society. Certainly nothing remained of the former distrust which could be observed in the first students. The silent student A. Strýček will enter the Society. Two others, however, leave the college this year; one, a Frenchman, is destined for the Capuchin novitiate for missionary work among the negroes, while the other, a German, having experienced difficulties in the Eastern rite, wanted to join a seminary in his own country.²²

Strýček was sent to the Eastern rite novitiate of Zagreb, but a year later the Yugoslav government stopped granting visas to Catholic seminarists of the Eastern rite. Strýček returned to Italy, to the novitiate of Ariccia, where on September 8, 1938 he took his first vows.²³

For the next phase of his training period (the so-called Regency, which was an internship which lasted two to three years), the young Jesuit was sent to the Russian Collège Saint-Georges in Namur to serve as a *praefectus disciplinae* (discipline

18 ARSI Russicum.

19 Simon, “Slováci v Russicu: 1929–1940.”

20 Stríček, *Autobiografía*, 8.

21 Stríček, *Autobiografía*, 11–13; Personal file Aloisius Strýček, ASPMCG.

22 De Régis to Anton Prešeren, 1/8/1936, ARSI Russicum, Folder “Pont. Inst. Orient. 1935–36 Ex Officio Corr. Particulare.”

23 Stríček, *Autobiografía*, 13–14; Personal file Aloisius Strýček, ASPMCG.

master) and “to study Russian.”²⁴ According to his personal file, his performance as a *praefectus* was “cum mediocri satisfactione.” As a language teacher, however, he qualified “cum optima satisfactione.”²⁵ The Collège Saint-Georges had been founded in 1921 in Constantinople by French Jesuits to provide schooling for the sons of the thousands of Russian families that had fled Russia after the defeat of the White Armies at the end of 1920. In March 1923, the institute, its staff, and 38 pupils were transferred to Namur, where it was attached to the Jesuit Collège Notre-Dame de la Paix. During the day, the children went to school at the Jesuit Collège or other Catholic institutions in the neighborhood. Saint-Georges itself provided boarding, effectively creating an entirely Russian environment with Russian as the language of communication, Russian language classes, and Russian culture and religious instruction (Catholicism of the Eastern rite). It thus served as a model for the future Russicum. Saint-Georges was also directly funded by the Vatican and run by the Jesuits. Although some of its graduates would later enter the Russicum, the conversion of Russians was not the primary goal of the Jesuits. Gaining sympathy among Russia’s future elites (or the people who, it was believed at the time, would later emerge as the elites) was much higher on their agenda. And many Russians who were also Orthodox were happy to send their children to Namur. Unlike in other Catholic countries, the Catholic Church in Belgium and especially its primate, Cardinal Mercier (1851–1926), were reputed to refrain from proselytism.²⁶ In reality, however, conversion was part of the deal. In exchange for a good education at a moderate cost, many parents turned a blind eye to Catholic pressure as long as it did not affect the family’s standing in the Russian émigré community. The children themselves wanted to fit in with their Catholic environment (and please their teachers), and as many of them even spent their holidays at the college at the behest of the Jesuits, few parents were in a position to counter Catholic pressure.²⁷ Meanwhile, the sponsors of the *collège* measured their return on investment on the basis of the number of conversions. In his report to Rome of April 20, 1939, Paul Mailleux (1905–

24 Le Cocq (Provincial) to Mailleux (St. Georges), 28/7/1938. AFSI, Institut Saint-Georges Meudon (E-Me), Box 3; Le Cocq to Nilis (Sûreté publique), 12/9/1938. BSA F 1650 (Police des Etrangers), Personal File A313533 Strycek L.

25 Personal file Aloisius Stryček, ASPMCG.

26 Coudenys, *Leven voor de tsaar*, 52–59; Coudenys, Wim. “Cardinal Mercier and the Russian Emigration” (forthcoming); Elens and Rouleau, “L’histoire de Saint-Georges. De Constantinople à Meudon”; Emond, “Le problème religieux chez les émigrés russes”; Tamigneaux, “Le Cardinal Mercier et l’Aide belge aux Russes”; Bieliavsky, “Le cardinal Mercier et l’émigration russe en Belgique.”

27 Coudenys, “Between Them and Us”; Coudenys, “Proselytism, charity, imperialism.”

1983), the director of Saint-Georges, stressed that he himself refrained from converting pupils under his care to avoid direct conflicts with the Orthodox community, but he was adamant that his little Russians were so well-embedded in their Belgian Catholic environment that as many as half of them eventually converted.²⁸ This met with the approval of Włodzimierz Ledóchowski (1868–1942), the superior general of the Society of Jesus in Rome.²⁹ In his memoirs, Strýček describes Saint-Georges as an experiment on the fringes of what was achievable within the Catholic Church at that time:

For the pupils of the college [Notre-Dame de la Paix] attending mass was obligatory. There could be no exception for the boarders at Saint-Georges! Let them pray according to their own rite! It goes without saying that at that time inviting an Orthodox priest for that purpose was out of the question. Some of the boys were Russian Catholics, and in the *collège* there were Catholic priests of the Eastern rite.³⁰ Every day, Father Victor [Richter, 1899–1976] and Father Dimitri [Kuz'min-Karavaev, 1886–1959] celebrated liturgy for the pupils of Saint-Georges. Usually, a [Eastern rite] liturgy is sung and lasts longer than a Latin mass. To gain time before the beginning of the classes at the college, the pupils attended a spoken liturgy, which is completely unacceptable for Russians. Like it or not, the Orthodox children had to accept the order of things.³¹

In April 1939, Strýček took his protégés to the Easter service in the Russian Orthodox Church in Charleroi,³² where he encouraged them to participate in the liturgy and sing along with the choir: “I had neglected the ban on *communicatio in sacris* [participation in a non-Catholic service]. Back in Namur, I got an earful.”³³ This, perhaps, gained him the qualification of being a mediocre praefectus, but there is no concrete reference to this incident either in the archives of Saint-Georges, or in Strýček’s personal file in the Jesuit archives. As a matter of fact, apart from some administrative notes, there are no references at all to Strýček during that period, let alone sources that corroborate his memoirs. This is probably due to Strýček’s extremely young age. He was only 22 when he arrived in Namur in late September 1938, and he was still in the early stages of his *probatio*. Moreover,

28 Mailleux to Card. Tisserant, 20/4/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 7.

29 Ledóchowski to Le Cocq, 31/5/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.

30 Stricheck, *Autobiografiia*, 16.

31 Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 48.

32 Nedosekin, “Istoriia Sviato-Troitskogo prikhoda.”

33 Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 49; cf. Stricheck, *Autobiografiia*, 16.

one can wonder about the accuracy of Strýček's memoirs. They largely coincide with and sometimes almost seem to be based on the official history of Saint-Georges, published in 1993. Did Strýček use this account as a source, or did the authors of this history build on his stories? And last but not least, Strýček's memories were probably colored by the more ecumenical attitudes that Saint-Georges and, for that matter, the whole of the Catholic Church would adopt in later years and of which Strýček himself was an adept.³⁴

When Strýček arrived in Namur in September 1938, Saint-Georges was more or less regaining momentum after years of financial and organizational turmoil.³⁵ It was now led by a dynamic, Russian-speaking director (Paul Mailloux) and was part of a broader Jesuit structure, which also included the Foyer Universitaire Slave, the Russian student home at the University of Louvain (Leuven).³⁶ Moreover, thanks to the new influx of financial means and personnel from Rome ("I wish all my colleges were as well provided for by Rome as yours is," the Provincial wrote to Mailloux³⁷), there were even plans to diversify the trajectories offered to Saint-Georges' boarders. As the materially and psychologically deprived Russian émigrés were not always up to the high academic standards of Notre-Dame de la Paix, it was considered potentially worthwhile to send them to technical or vocational schools as well.³⁸ And thanks to the arrival of the English Jesuit Paul Dickinson (1914–2002) and a flaw in the Belgian legislation, the (obligatory) Flemish classes at Notre-Dame de la Paix ("many parents feel (correctly) that too much emphasis is put on the study of a language of primarily local interest"), were replaced by English classes in Saint-Georges itself.³⁹ A year later, however, things were changing dramatically as events on the international political stage were becoming increasingly ominous. In August 1939, part of the *collège's* premises at Namur were requisitioned by the Belgian army in view of the threat of war.⁴⁰ In September, F. Mailloux was mobilized. On October 31, the Sœurs de la Charité de Namur announced that they would not be able to provide bread for free anymore.⁴¹ Meanwhile, developments in the East, notably the Soviet-Finnish war, put the Russian apostolate in a new,

34 Elens and Rouleau, "L'histoire de Saint-Georges. De Constantinople à Meudon."

35 Cf. the annual reports of Saint-Georges in AFSI, E-Me, Box 7.

36 Coudenys, *Leven voor de tsaar*, 70–80; Coudenys, "A Good Cause?"

37 Le Cocq to Mailloux, 28/7/1938. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.

38 Mailloux to Le Cocq, 8/9/1938. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.

39 Mailloux to Tisserant, 20/4/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 7.

40 Mailloux to Le Cocq, 27/8/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.

41 Mère Saint François de Sales Michaux to Mailloux, 31/10/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 4.

complicated perspective. Who would sympathize with the Russians now that the Soviets had attacked a neighboring country?⁴² When war broke out in Belgium on May 10, 1940, 45 of the 60 pupils returned to their parents in Brussels and Paris. The other 15 fled to France under the guidance of Victor Richter. Alojz Strýček, Dmitrii Kuzmin-Karavaev, and Frantisek Przewlekly (1884–1957) stayed behind in Namur. Unlike the rest of the (garrison) town, Saint-Georges remained relatively unscathed by the bombardments of May 1940. Within days, the refugees returned to Namur.⁴³ Soon afterwards, however, it was decided to move the college to Paris, as most of the pupils were living in the French capital.⁴⁴ In 1941, Mailleux, Kuzmin-Karavaev, and Przewlekly were permitted to leave Belgium, and Richter was allowed to leave in 1942. Strýček remained in Belgium to pursue his Jesuit training.⁴⁵

In 1940, Strýček had resumed his philosophy studies (he was in his third year) at the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine Novitiate of Wépion, just outside of Namur, but he failed his exams. In his memoirs, he acknowledged that his Roman training had not prepared him for the exacting standards of Belgian higher education, but he also blamed his professors for being too rigid and blind to the social concerns of the younger generation.⁴⁶ The following year, he enrolled in the “minor” theology program at the Jesuit Collegium Maximum in Louvain, destined for future missionaries and priests without degrees in philosophy. This Jesuit institution in the rue des Récollets (Minderbroederstraat), which should not be confounded with the Faculty of Theology at the University of Louvain, was renowned for its internationalism and modern spirit (“the spirit of Louvain”, as one author put it).⁴⁷

In his memoirs, Strýček claims that in Louvain, he took his Russian interests to a new level. The Louvain library provided plenty of reading materials, and there was ample opportunity to connect with Russian émigrés, either students at

42 Mailleux to Jourdain, 28/1/1940. AFSI, E-Me, Box 4; P. Pavani (Delegazione Apostolica nell'Iran) to Mailleux, 7/2/1940. AFSI, E-Me, Box 4.

43 Mailleux to Richter, 13/5/1940. AFSI, EMe 4, foto 4875; Mailleux to Tisserant, 23/6. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3; Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 51–53; Strichek, *Autobiografiia*, 17–18; Elens and Rouleau, “L’histoire de Saint-Georges. De Constantinople à Meudon,” 22–23.

44 Cf. Mailleux to A. Kulik (Paris), 20/7/1940. AFSI, E-Me, Box 4.

45 Javorka to Strýček, 19/6/1941. AFSI, Personal File A. Strycek (DP), Folder 2; Elens and Rouleau, “L’histoire de Saint-Georges. De Constantinople à Meudon,” 25–26; Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 56; Strichek, *Autobiografiia*, 19.

46 Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 56–57.

47 Salas Fernández, “Alberto Hurtado: a biographical study,” 3, 199–239. Cf. also Dumont, “Vie et destinée d’un Collège Jésuite”; De Maeyer et al., “Louvain. IV. Couvents. XIXe–XXe siècle.”

the Foyer Universitaire Slave in de rue de Malines (Mechelsestraat) or Russians living in Louvain.⁴⁸ Many of them had become Catholics. Irina Posnova (1914–1997), a Louvain graduate and future founder of the Russian Catholic publishing house Zhizn' s Bogom (La Vie avec Dieu);⁴⁹ Ilia Denisov (1893–1971), who in 1943 defended a groundbreaking dissertation on Maximus the Greek (Maksim Grek, 1470–1556);⁵⁰ Vera Naryshkina-Witte (1883–1963), the adopted daughter of the former Russian Prime Minister Sergei Witte (1849–1915) and a sponsor of schooling programs for Russian émigré children.⁵¹ But he allegedly was also in touch with Orthodox émigrés, such as F. Georgii Tarasov (1893–1963), the priest of the Russian Orthodox churches in Brussels, Louvain, and Ghent and the future archbishop of the Patriarchal Exarchate for Orthodox Parishes in Western Europe (Paris).⁵² However, as the Nazis only recognized the authority of the competing (and collaborating) Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, Tarasov (and many émigrés) was rather restricted in his movements.⁵³ This was the context (described vaguely and misleadingly in Strýček's memoirs)⁵⁴ in which a new (and adventurous) phase began in the life of the young Jesuit.

Alexis Strýček

In 1942, the Germans started to transfer labor force from the Eastern Front to the coal mines in Belgium. Initially, these forced laborers were (Ukrainian) civilians (*Ostarbeiter*), but as of the summer of 1942, the supply consisted mainly of Soviet prisoners of war. This was particularly the case in the province of Limburg, where the first POWs arrived in September 1942.⁵⁵ Many of these POWs fled when they got a chance. By the spring of 1943, the number of

48 Strýček, *Souvenirs*, 59–60.

49 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irina_Posnova.

50 Denisoff, *Maxime le Grec et l'Occident*; cf. Olmsted, “Two Exiles: the Roots and Fortunes of Elie Denisoff.”

51 Coudenys, *Leven voor de tsaar*, passim. There is no proof, however, that Naryshkina-Witte ever lived in Louvain (BSA, F 1650, Personal File 1171591 Naryshkine C.), and neither that she had become a Catholic. This also suggests that Strýček's memoirs may not be totally reliable.

52 Niv'er, *Pravoslavnye sviaschenoslužhiteli*, 148–49.

53 Coudenys, *Leven voor de tsaar*, 254–56. On the history of the Russian Orthodox Church during World War II, see Model, “L'église orthodoxe russe.”

54 Strýček, *Souvenirs*, 59–61; Strichék, *Autobiografia*, 20.

55 Put, *Russische krijgsgevangenen* 31–78; cf. also Wollants and Bouveroux, *Russische partizanen*; Kohlbacher et al., *Het Russisch kamp*.

Soviet POWs had risen to some 250, about 5 percent of the total.⁵⁶ According to Strýček, in late 1942, he was approached by Limburg youngsters on behalf of the Resistance. A Russian refugee was hiding in their barn, and they needed an interpreter. They did not trust the Russian translators in the coal mines, as they had been recruited from among (collaborating) Russian émigrés.⁵⁷ Whatever the case, in November 1942 the Louvain seminarian established contacts at the camp hospital of Waterschei. His first “protégé” was the Ukrainian *Ostarbeiter* Arsen’ Feshchenko, who was a regular patient of the camp hospital. Together with his comrades Adam and Nikola, Feshchenko complained about the working conditions (they had not been miners back home), the lack of food, and the cold. And they were happy to receive cigarettes, bread, fruit, clothing, and books (including a Bible) from the future priest.⁵⁸ By the end of December, Strýček had made arrangements to visit the Waterschei patients,⁵⁹ and he had even found others who delivered parcels on his behalf.⁶⁰ Strýček’s superiors gave their blessing to this “fruitful work among the prisoners,” and they reckoned that through Strýček, “the Lord will increasingly show mercy for these poor people.”⁶¹ The visits and the parcel service served as an ideal cover to rove the area between Louvain and the Limburg coal basin and even further afield, in the Ardennes.⁶² By the summer of 1943, Strýček’s services extended to the escaped prisoners who had gone into hiding in the woods of East-Brabant and Limburg.⁶³ One of the escapees was Anton Osip, a medical student at the University of Kiev who in July 1943 had been put in charge of the Waterschei camp hospital, two months before he himself had fled.⁶⁴ Osip’s fate was often the subject of letters by Maria Indestege (1912–1975), a nurse at the hospital who was at the heart of the escape

56 Put, *Russische krijgsgevangenen*, 225; Wollants and Bouveroux, *Russische partizanen*, 19.

57 Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 61; Strickek, *Antobiografia*, 20; Wollants and Bouveroux, *Russische partizanen*, 138. Cf. also Put, *Russische krijgsgevangenen*, 79–80.

58 Feshchenko to Strýček, 20/10/1942, 25/11/1942, 2/12/1942, 6/12/1942, 15/12/1942, 21/12/1942, 27/12/1942; 5/1/1943, 9/1/1943, 23/1/1943, 6/2/1943, 7/3/1943; Nikola Sobol to Strýček, 14/4/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

59 J. Thoelen (parish priest of Waterschei) to Strýček, 23/12/1942. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

60 A. Godin SJ (Liège) to Strýček, 31/12/1942 & 23/2/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

61 E. Gessler SJ to Strýček, 13/4/1943 & 26/6/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

62 Cf. Edm. Pol [illegible] (Bousoit) to Strýček, 18/3/1943 and H. De Visscher (Châtelineau) to Strýček, 22/2/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

63 M. Seměnov and G. Leont’ev (Waanrode) to Strýček, 15/7/1943, 25/9/1943 and s.d.; Soviet POW to Strýček, 22/8/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

64 A. Osip to Strýček, 20/7/1943, 29/7/1943, 28/8/1943, 8/9/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2. Cf. Put, *Russische krijgsgevangenen*, 300–1.

network. More than once, she had to urge Strýček to keep a low profile so as not to give away the network.⁶⁵ A similar warning was issued by Anatolii Khrustalov, a friend of Osip's, who worried that too many of the prisoners knew Strýček: "It would be better if you stopped coming, because we are suspicious of the émigrés [the interpreters]."⁶⁶ Strýček's reputation eventually reached a group of Russian émigrés who themselves were organizing a Russian resistance group, "Partisans Russes en Belgique," with strong links to the Limburg coal mines.⁶⁷ Although these émigrés would later claim that the Limburg escape route was an integral part of their network,⁶⁸ there are strong indications that this was not exactly the case.⁶⁹ The escaped Soviet POWs created their own ring "For the Motherland" (*Za rodinu*), which was organized as a Soviet partisan division and consisted by the end of the war of some 400 fighters. There was not much love lost between these two movements, and Strýček himself did not really warm to the émigrés. He preferred the company of the Soviets.⁷⁰

His contacts with Soviet citizens and POWs also offered the aspiring missionary an opportunity to gain second-hand information about Soviet Russia. Some inmates seem to have been happy to oblige Father Aleksei (Alexis), the name they used for him, as it was far easier to pronounce and remember than Alojz. *Ostarbeiter* Andrei Netripailo, for instance, eagerly received parcels and visits by Alojz, and in exchange, he tried to convince his benefactor of his religious zeal. He made inquiries about Orthodox émigrés who might help and wrote about a visit of an Orthodox priest to the camp, icons, Easter, the danger of atheist co-prisoners, and Jews (allegedly Feshchenko was one). "Thank you for your concern," he wrote in a letter to Alojz, "you are a well-loved man and a good soul who does not forget us Orthodox; for these good deeds, the merciful Lord will remember you."⁷¹ The religious theme would surface in many a letter, and this was clearly the kind of information Strýček was seeking. Some three

65 M. Indestege to Strýček, 4/10/1943, 22/10/1943, 26/11/1943, 6/12/1943, 31/12/1943, 27/3/1944, 3/6/1944, 24/7/1944; cf. also T. (Smeets?) (Peer) to Strýček, 11/10/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

66 A. Khrustalov to Strýček, 3/1/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

67 M. De Roover to Strýček, 13/1/1944; Feshchenko to Strýček 15/2/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

68 E. P. Wittouck (Shcherbatova) to Strýček, 29/4/1947 & 25/5/1947. AFSI, DP, Folder 2. Cf. *Partisans russes en Belgique*, BSA / CegeSoma (Brussels), Fonds Leo Lejeune, Folder 126; Put, *Russische krijgsgevangenen*, 288–302; Bieliavsky, Nicolas. "La résistance anti-allemande."

69 Wollants and Bouveroux, *Russische partizanen*, 134–43; Coudenys, *Leven voor de tsaar*, 270–273.

70 Strýček, *Souvenirs*, 67–69; Stricheck, *Autobiografija*, 21–22; Wollants and Bouveroux, *Russische partizanen*, 138–39.

71 Netripailo to Strýček, 10/2/1943, 21/2/1943, 23/2/1943, 1/3/1943, 18/4/1943, 15/2/1944, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

weeks after their first meeting, presumably in late 1943, another refugee, the 20-year old chemistry student and second lieutenant Pavel, wrote the following in a letter to Strýček:

I thought that after our first meeting, you must have thought that this is a man with Soviet schooling and is therefore no comrade (*tovariš*) of mine, but you are mistaken, I have always prayed and gone to church with my grandmother, admittedly not often, and when I finished school and went for my lieutenant's training, the last words of my grandmother were: "Pray, and god [sic] will always assist." And I always prayed and honored her will.⁷²

In other letters, Pavel gave in to Strýček's probing and further expanded on his religious upbringing. He stressed that, the anti-religious propaganda in the Soviet Union notwithstanding, many people had kept their faith, wore crosses, had their children baptized, and many young people still knew the Lord's Prayer and dodged anti-religious courses. "Foreigners, as well as Russians," he claimed, "exaggerate the importance of atheism among Russians."⁷³ Pavel increasingly saw Strýček as a "friend to whom I can write everything and [from whom] I receive true instruction and good advice." And he continued:

I would like to know your opinion about Russia, how such a deeply religious people has a government that rejects god [sic]; I think that this cannot continue for much longer. Because only the biggest idiot can say that he was born without a father. For that reason, my grandfather called Stalin a "wise donkey," but please don't tell this to anyone.⁷⁴

Pavel asked Strýček not to share his contentions with other Soviets and even to burn his letters. As his letters reveal, not all his comrades shared his religious interests. Many of them radiated the skepticism of their Soviet upbringing and commented on the apparent contradictions in the Bible. One anonymous letter writer claimed that, "There is no truth there, deceit upon deception, everywhere slaughtering of children and adults, all done with the blessing of God," and the author agreed with Marx that religion is "the opium of the people."⁷⁵ On March

72 Pavel to Štrýček, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

73 Pavel to Štrýček, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

74 Pavel to Štrýček, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

75 Anonymous to Strýček, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

21, 1944, one of them openly countered Strýček, who three months previously had been (secretly) ordained as a deacon in Paris.⁷⁶

I will be frank. In my previous letter, I consciously did not congratulate you on your ecclesiastical promotion. There is no need to pretend in front of you, share niceties, when it is not sincere, or as they say, “from the heart.” You have sown confusion in my head. Until now, I have rejected God’s existence on the basis of the evidence I had, but since I met you, it proved insufficient; the question of whether God exists, is far deeper than I imagined. I had to reconsider everything and ponder again. [...] And meanwhile I remain an atheist.⁷⁷

The author of the letter repeated traditional arguments: the contradictions in the Holy Scripture (how could an educated man like Strýček put his faith in texts riddled with contradictions?), Strýček’s alleged disrespect for Russia (how dare he call the Russian people “poor”?), the notion of papal infallibility (why was the head of the Catholic Church infallible and not the head of the Orthodox Church?), the (Catholic) allegorical interpretation of the Bible versus the literal interpretation widespread among Orthodox émigrés, the claims of both Catholics and Orthodox to primacy among the Churches, and the notion of a perfect God as creator of an imperfect world. The letter left its mark, as Strýček copied it several times.

Strýček’s religious zeal and growing expertise on Russia also affected his Belgian surroundings. In the summer of 1943, F. Etienne (Stefaan) Gervais (1912–1982) of the Franciscans in Rekem (Limburg) made inquiries about a Russian language course.⁷⁸ Were the Rekem Franciscans also dealing with Russian escapees? In February 1944, Henri De Visscher (1913–1994), a former student at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome who had been forced to return to Belgium at the outbreak of war and was now biding his time in Châtelineau (Hainaut), had heard from a Limburg seminarian about Strýček’s Russian interests and confessed that he also wanted to dedicate his life to the Russian cause.⁷⁹ As of late spring or early summer 1944, *Soeur* Cecilia (Evgeniia Morozova, 1912–2011), a Russian Catholic nun of the Eastern rite who was working as a nurse in the civilian hospital in Nivelles, started to brief him about

76 Strycek, *Souvenirs*, 63–64.

77 A. to Strýček, 21/3/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

78 E. Gervais to Strýček, 19/8/1943 & 29/8/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

79 De Visscher (Châtelineau) to Strýček, 22/2/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2. Cf. Rigaux, “De Visscher, Charles.” With thanks to Prof. F. Ost, De Visscher’s nephew.

the fate of Russian prisoners in her region (first POWs and, as of September 1944, Russian collaborators) and her strained relationship with the Russian Orthodox community. She also asked for advice on the publication of Catholic literature in Russian (the life of St. Vincent de Paul).⁸⁰ In early 1945, by which time the Belgian territory had been completely liberated, Strýček advised a Russian friend of his (a woman) about the publication of a modest Russian-language catechism, as all the available religious literature had been seized by the Russian collaborators. Strýček advised her to contact Irina Posnova.⁸¹ Around the same time, Maria Indestege, the *resistant* and nurse with whom he had closely collaborated in Waterschei, complained about the quiet. “Strange,” she wrote, “after all the time we lived in danger.” She also complained about the boredom of the newly regained freedom: “Can I not be of any help in one of your undertakings? I’d do it with all my heart, even if it means going to Russia.”⁸²

The latter was precisely what Strýček had in mind in the spring of 1945. Since the liberation of the larger part of the Belgian territory in September 1944, his “Russian career” had taken a sharp turn. The Soviet partisans of For the Motherland had assisted the Allies in cleansing Limburg of German stay-behinds and collaborators and in return had received some sort of (informal) recognition.⁸³ By mid-September, the Belgian authorities had started to take control of the situation, which also implied that (uncontrolled) resistance groups were to be disarmed and disbanded. The Soviet partisans were instructed to assemble in Hasselt, but for political reasons (Belgium did not want to offend the Soviet ally) did not have to surrender their arms.⁸⁴ All of a sudden, Father Strýček became the official liaison between For the Motherland and the Belgian

80 E. Morozova to Strýček, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2. On E. Morozova, see Elena Maria (Sr). “In ricordo di Madre Ekaterina.” *Lettera dal monastero della Dormizione di Maria*, no. 45 (2010). <http://www.dormizione.it/?p=1>.

81 A. Tugarinova to Strýček, 3/2/1945, 25/2/1945, 5/3/1945, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2. Tugarinova was a zealous convert who in 1939 had encouraged the Jesuits to create a boarding school for girls, using Saint-Georges as a model. C. Micara (Nuncio to Belgium) to D. Tardini (Congregazione per gli affari ecclesiastici straordinari, Rome), 15/6/1934 (Dicasterio per le Chiese Orientale, Pontificia Commissione pro Russia, 205/28 fasc. 2: Comité Robyn de Séjours aux enfants russes 1930–1935); *Projet d’un Internat pour filles en 1939*. AFSI, E-Me, Box 4.

82 M. Indestege to Strýček, 31/3/1945. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

83 Strýček, *Souvenirs*, 66–70.

84 Commander of the “Secret Army Limburg” to the “Russian commander” (I. Diadkin), 16/9/1944 (Russian translation by Strýček); cf. also B. Ghyselincq (commander of the communist resistance organization Onafhankelijkheidsfront) to “Chères Kamerades” [sic] about his return to civil life, 11/10/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2; Strýček, *Souvenirs*, 70–73.

and Allied authorities. He translated documents into Russian on behalf of the local authorities and also informed them on who had been assisting the Russian partisans and thus merited recognition as a Belgian patriot.⁸⁵ And although the partisans had come to consider Strýček one of their own, the fact that he was a priest (he had been ordained in Louvain on June 27, 1944) complicated things. When he had been an intermediary between individuals and underground groups during the war, Strýček's position as a member of the clergy had been of little importance (and an excellent cover). However, after the liberation, For the Motherland was organized and perceived as a military brigade, and a Catholic priest among Soviet soldiers was inconceivable, especially for Moscow. In late September, a Soviet military delegation had landed in Brussels to keep an eye on Soviet citizens in Belgium and organize their repatriation, if necessary with force.⁸⁶ For the time being, however, Strýček was needed as an interpreter and a fixer, and it was agreed that he would accompany the brigade to Marseilles via Saint-Amand-les-Bains (in the French Department of Nord) and Mailly-le-Camp (in the Department of Aube). Strýček was walking a thin line. As a Catholic priest, he was supposed to keep away from military and political affairs, but his Russian friends expected him to join them in the euphoria of victory, which of course was presented in Soviet propaganda as a triumph of the new world power and its ideology.⁸⁷ This ranged from a welcome to the US troops ("we are very happy to see our Allies in our home") in early September 1944⁸⁸ to the organization of a Soviet dance and sing-along spectacle in Valenciennes in late 1944:

You have come here tonight to hear our songs and watch our dances; you have come to show your sympathy for that great people that has contributed so much to the liberation of Europe. You also have to come tonight to see the Red soldiers, to get to know the citizens of the new Russia. Watch and listen to our soldiers; the Soviet man is the spitting image of the land of the Soviets.⁸⁹

85 Models of Russian documents for the communalities of Meldert (17/9/1944), Neeroeteren (23/10/1944), Ophoven (25/10/1944), Grote Brogel (s.d.); G. Couplet to Strýček, 24/3/1945 and testimony Strýček on behalf of Couplet, 6/4/1945. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

86 Cf. Pauwels, "Sovjetkampen in België. Een ongekend verhaal?"; Luyckx, "Russische krijgsgevangenen van de nazi's."

87 Strýček, *Souvenirs*, 74–93.

88 Address to the US military, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

89 Address Valenciennes, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

The brigade was to embark from Marseille for Odessa on April 29, 1945, and apparently Strýček had planned to accompany them home. His hope to continue his mission in Soviet Russia, however, was thwarted by Cardinal Eugène Tisserant (1884–1972), head of the Congregation for the Eastern Church in Rome. In his memoirs, Strýček ascribed the interdiction to go to Soviet Russia to the emerging Cold War (a rather antedated concept) and the growing hostility between Moscow and Rome. And he admitted that it probably had saved him from being persecuted (and executed) as a “spy from the Vatican.”⁹⁰ A short assessment in his Roman file, dating from 1950, characterized him as “religiously in unity with God, burning with the zeal of souls, energetic, sociable, and pleasant but nervous and therefore amiable and at times rough and implacable. Sometimes even a little vulgar in his manner of dealing with the ruder.”⁹¹ Was this the same Strýček whom de Régis had called “a silent student”?

In an (anonymous) report on wartime events in Limburg, it was stressed that the inhabitants of the region were “good Catholics” who

were happy to be of service to the unfortunates fleeing the Gestapo. To make themselves understood, they found help in the person of Jesuit Father A.S., who with the approval of his superiors abandoned his studies and followed his dear friends into the woods of Limburg. [...] Some months later, the Brigade embarked with its wartime trophies to return to their fatherland. The heart of the Father was with his men on the boat, but Providence did not want him to accompany his friends to Russia. “Lord, thy will be done.”⁹²

Antonina (Tonía) Ivanova, a female member of the Brigade and a fierce communist, wrote a farewell letter to Strýček:

Dear Father Aleksei, before I have to return to the Motherland, I have to say a few words to you. What’s done is done and won’t come back. But what has been, will never be forgotten. Personally, I’ll never forget the man with the little beard and moustache who so often helped me and who during all the time we’ve known each other was exclusively well-disposed towards me and tried to help me in every way he could. [...] You probably won’t believe what I want to say, but I’ll tell you the truth: I’m saying farewell to you, dear Father Aleksei, with pain in my heart and tears in my eyes.⁹³

90 Strýček, *Souvenirs*, 89–90.

91 Personal file Aloisius Strýček, 1950. ASPMCG.

92 Report, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

93 T. Ivanova to Strýček, [29/4/1944]. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.

Ivanova's description of Strýček, it seems, was picked up in the 1960 Soviet documentary novel *In a Foreign Country* (*V chuzhoi strane*) about the Russian partisans in Limburg, in which Father Aleksei was presented as a Czech priest who "with his ginger goatee and pince-nez on a black cord very much resembled Chekhov."⁹⁴ The author of this novel, the military journalist Abram Vol'f (1916–1989), consciously downplayed the role Strýček had played, reducing him to an accomplice of white Russian émigrés.

Strýček remained in France, where he rejoined the Collège Saint-Georges, now established in Paris. He resumed his teaching and supervising position and continued to deepen his knowledge of Russia, "attaining a rare proficiency in the language, which he spoke and wrote like a native."⁹⁵ He wrote a manual on the nightmare of every student of Russian, the Russian accentuation (1966), a dissertation on the eighteenth-century Russian author Denis Fonvizin (1976), and a Russian textbook (1992).⁹⁶ In 1993, at the advanced age of 78, he finally got the opportunity to accomplish his Russian mission. He traveled to the city of Novosibirsk. It was during this period that his wartime feats were recognized, first by the Russian authorities and then by the Belgian government, which in 2010 gave him the Order of Leopold.⁹⁷ In 2011, Strýček returned to France, where shortly before his death in 2013, immobilized and losing his linguistic capacities, he dictated his *Souvenirs* (in French).⁹⁸

Conclusion

In March 1993, Arthur Wollants and Jos Bouveroux interviewed Strýček, or Father Alexis, as he was known in France, for their book on the Russian partisans in Limburg. Having been misled by their main source, Vol'f's aforementioned novel *In a Foreign Country*, they addressed Strýček as a Czech. An offended Strýček immediately put them right: "I'm Slovak, not Czech!"⁹⁹ Undoubtedly, his

94 Vol'f, Abram. *V chuzhoi strane*. Saratov: Privolzh'e, 1960; cf. Wollants and Bouveroux, *Russische partizanen*, 134.

95 Simon, *Pro Russia*, 469.

96 Strichek, *Rukovodstvo po russkomu udareniiu*; Strycek, *La Russie des Lumières*; Strycek and Lubouchkine, *Pratique du russe parlé*.

97 "Nagrada Nashla geroya." *Sibirskaiia katolicheskaia gazeta*, June 1, 2010. <https://sib-catholic.ru/nagrada-nashla-geroya-2/>

98 [Koch-Lubouchine, Marina]. "Avant-propos"; [Maréchal], "In memoriam: le Père Alexis Strycek"; "Umer otets Aleksei Strichek."

99 Wollants and Bouveroux, *Russische partizanen*, 138.

insistence on his identity as a Slovak was influenced at least in part by the split, three months earlier, of Czechoslovakia into two independent nation states (or at least better approximations of nation states). There are no indications, however, that during his stay in Belgium Strýček or his Belgian contacts ever identified him(self) as Slovak. He was a Jesuit novice with a vocation in the Russian apostolate who had come to Belgium to fulfill his “regency” (at Saint-Georges) and who, forced by the circumstances of war, continued his theological training in Louvain, where he eventually also received his ordination in June 1944. It was thanks to this religious identity that he was able to pursue activities as part of the resistance in Limburg, remain under the radar of the Gestapo, and effectively become part of the Catholic community. In Strýček’s case, this amounted to “blending in.” Everyone knew him, but they knew hardly anything about him, except, perhaps, that he had knowledge of Russian language and culture. He was hardly the only person to possess such knowledge. On the eve of World War II, some 10,000 Russian émigrés were living in Belgium, but they had remained foreign, not only as a (national) migrant community, but also as belonging to a different religion, i.e. (Russian) Orthodoxy. During his period at Saint-Georges in Namur, Strýček had come to know this Russian émigré community rather well, but as a Catholic, he had always remained on its fringes. And while some of these émigrés collaborated with the Germans (notably as interpreters in the POW-camps), Strýček remained unaffected by the collaborationist stain of being a Russian émigré or, for that matter, a Slovak national (the Germans had created a client Slovak State in 1939, led by clerical fascist and priest Jozef Tiso).¹⁰⁰

Because of these unique qualities (his lack of any close connection with the Russian émigré community, his proficiency in Russian, and his knowledge of local languages, including French, German, and some Flemish), Strýček became the interlocutor for the *Ostarbeiter*, Soviet POWs, escapees, and partisans in the area between Louvain and the Limburg coal basin. His Catholic identity was taken for granted, for there was (probably) no alternative. And by the time of the liberation, which implied the return of Soviet discipline among the partisans, only trust (the trust of the partisans, the Belgians, and the Allies) and Strýček’s deep empathy with his Soviet proteges made it possible for him to accompany the Soviet brigade to Marseilles. It took a Roman interdiction to stop Strýček from departing for the Soviet Union and ultimately to save him from a fateful end as a “spy from the Vatican.”

100 Kamenec, “The Slovak state, 1939–1945.”

Key to Strýček's position, however, is his being an individual who occupied different positions or played different roles in different communities: as a Catholic cleric in his Belgian environment, as a Russianist among the Soviet partisans, all the while driven by his mission for the Russian apostolate. As such, the case of Alojz-Aleksei-Alexis Strýček challenges (traditional) migrant history, which builds on the category of nationality to map migration and describe the migrant communities that result from it. His example suggests that religion as an identity marker can be at least as powerful as nationality, thereby imposing borders between "them" and "us" that do not coincide with those implied by national or nation state identities. Strýček's case therefore better fits in with the paradigm of "migrant knowledge," which focuses on the circulation of knowledge in and through migration and on the intermediaries in this process. Strýček possessed a unique knowledge of Russia and Russian, first received at home (e.g. his claim that, "In Slovakia, we were 'panslavists' and saw in Russia the future of the Slavs"), as a Catholic of the Eastern rite (at the Russicum), a *praefectus* and teacher of Russian émigré children (in Saint-Georges), during the war (as a translator and fixer for the Russian partisans), and after the war in France (in Saint-Georges as an academic) and in Russia (as a missionary). Strýček's case is also distinctive because his knowledge of Russian was not born of necessity but of chance. After all, as a Catholic novice and priest, he had direct access to Italy, Belgium, and France. The 1929 papal encyclical *Quam curam*, allegedly, had given him a Russian mission, and with that, a thirst for knowledge of Russian culture and the Russian language, in which he would excel.

From this point of view, Strýček can be seen as a catalyst figure whose specific competencies set a process in motion but who was not consumed by that process himself. Conversely, the same applies to his Slovak identity. Strýček was first and foremost a missionary of the Russian apostolate. That he was of Slovak (or Austro-Hungarian or Czechoslovak) origin was merely a coincidence.

Archival Sources

Archivum Romanorum Societatis Iesu (Rome), (ARSI)

VIII: Collegium Russicum

A. Epistolae 1001 (1928–1947)

De Régis to Anton Prešeren SJ (assistant to the Jesuit General for the Slavic Provinces)

- Archivio Storico Provincia Euro-Mediterranea della Compagnia di Gesù, Rome
(ASPEMCG)
Fondi della Provincia Romana
- Archives Françaises de la Compagnie de Jésus, Vanves (AFSI)
- Rijksarchief in België [State Archives of Belgium] (BSA)
F 1650 (Police des Etrangers), Personal File A313533 Strycek L.
F 1650, Personal File 1171591 Naryschkine C.

Bibliography

- Annuaire statistique de la Belgique et du Congo Belge: Ciquante-troisième année – 1923–1924.* Brussels: Imprimerie Lesigne, 1926.
- Aubert, Roger. *Le Saint-Siège et l'union des Églises: Textes choisis et introduits.* Brussels: Editions universitaires, 1947.
- Baumer, Iso. *Von der Unio zur Communio: 75 Jahre Catholica Unio Internationalis, Ppstlich approbiertes Werk der Ostkirchenhilfe, 1924–1999.* Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2002.
- Beyers, Leen, Machteld Venken, and Idesbald Goddeeris. “Families, foreignness, migration.” *The History of the Family* 14, no. 2 (2009): 125–31. doi: 10.1016/j.hisfam.2009.04.001
- Bieliavsky, Nicolas. “La résistance anti-allemande des émigrés russes blancs en Belgique pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale.” *Militaria Belgica* (2015): 165–93.
- Bieliavsky, Nicolas. “Le cardinal Mercier et l’émigration russe en Belgique.” *Irénikon* 76 (2003): 179–98.
- Caplan, Jane, and John Torpey, eds. *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Coudenys, Wim. “A Good Cause? Russian Students at the Catholic University of Leuven, 1921–1940.” In *For East is East: Liber Amicorum Wojciech Skalmowski*, edited by Tatjana Soldatjenkova, and Emmanuel Waegemans, 509–25. Leuven–Paris–Dudley: Peeters, 2003.
- Coudenys, Wim. “A Failed Apostolat de Press: Boris Solonevich and Catholic Anti-Communist Propaganda (1945–1955).” In *Skreshcheniia sudeb: Literarische und kulturelle Beziehungen zwischen Russland und dem Westen. A Festschrift for Fedor B. Poljakov*, edited by Lazar Fleishman, Stefan Michael Newerkla, and Michael Wachtel, 593–618. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019.
- Coudenys, Wim. “A life between fact and fiction: The history of Vladimir G. Orlov.” *Revolutionary Russia* 21, no. 2 (2008): 179–202. doi: 10.1080/09546540802461118

- Coudenys, Wim. “A. V. Amfiteatrov’s Stena plača i stena nerušimaja and the Attempts to Restore the Fighting Spirit among Russian Émigrés in the Early 1930s.” *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch* NF 1 (2013): 62–73.
- Coudenys, Wim. “Between Them and Us: The Construction of Community Borders by Russian Emigrés in Belgium.” *Ab Imperio. Theory and History of Nationalism and Empire in the Post-Soviet Space*, no. 2 (2003): 193–210.
- Coudenys, Wim. “Fictional, but Truthful: Nicolas Belina-Podgaetsky, a Soviet Journalist at the Service of Catholic Anti-Communism.” *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique* 111, no. 1 (2016): 148–80. doi : 10.1484/J.RHE.5.110726
- Coudenys, Wim. *Leven voor de tsaar. Russische ballingen, samenzweerders en collaborateurs in België* [Living for the tsar: Russian exiles, conspirators, and collaborators in Belgium]. Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2004.
- Coudenys, Wim. “Proselytism, charity, imperialism: Russian émigrés in Belgium between Catholicism and Orthodoxy.” In *Die russische Diaspora in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert: religiöses und kulturelles Leben*, edited by Fedor B. Poljakov, and Adelbert Davids, 119–35. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Coudenys, Wim, and Patrick Rappoye. *Fallen far from the Fatherland: Russian Victims of World War I in Belgium*. Ieper: In Flanders Fields Museum, 2021.
- De Maeyer, Jan, Kristien Suenens, and Jo Luyten. “Louvain. IV. Couvents. XIXe–XXe siècle.” In *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Géographie Ecclésiastiques*, vol. 192–193a, edited by Luc Courtois, 131–61. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020.
- De Maeyer, Jan, and Vincent Viaene, eds. *World Views and Worldly Wisdom. Visions et Expériences du Monde: Religion, Ideology and Politics, 1750–2000 / Religion, Idéologie et Politique, 1750–2000*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017.
- Denissoff, Elie, and Graecus Maximus. *Maxime le Grec et l’Occident: contribution à l’histoire de la pensée religieuse et philosophique de Michel Trivolis*. Université du Louvain. Recueil de travaux d’histoire et de philologie. 3e série 14. Louvain: Bibliothèque de l’Université, 1943.
- Dumont, Camille. “Vie et destinée d’un Collège Jésuite: Louvain 1838–Bruxelles 1988.” In *Un Collège Théologique de la Compagnie de Jésus: 150e anniversaire Louvain 1838–Bruxelles 1988*, 7–46. Brussels: Institut d’Etudes Théologiques, 1989.
- Elena Maria (Sr). “In ricordo di Madre Ekaterina.” *Lettera dal monastero della Dormizione di Maria*, no. 45 (2010). <http://www.dormizione.it/?p=1>
- Elens, Antoine, and Rouleau, François. “L’histoire de Saint-Georges. De Constantinople à Meudon.” In *Un collège jésuite pour les Russes : Saint-Georges. De Constantinople à Meudon, 1921–1992*, 7–60. Paris: Bibliothèque slave de Paris, 1993.

- Emond, Elisabeth. “Le problème religieux chez les émigrés russes: le cas de l’internat Saint-Georges à Namur.” In *Foi, gestes et institutions religieuses aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, edited by Luc Courtois, and Jacques Pirotte, 147–57. Louvain-la-Neuve: Centre d’Histoire des Religions, 1991.
- Fouilloux, Etienne. *Les catholiques et l’unité chrétienne du XIXe au XXe siècle: Itinéraires européens d’expression française*. Paris: Le Centurion, 1982.
- Green, Abigail, and Vincent Viaene, eds. *Religious Internationals in the Modern World: Globalization and Faith Communities since 1750*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Kamenec, Ivan. “The Slovak state, 1939–1945.” In *Slovakia in History*, edited by Dušan Kováč, Martin D. Brown, and Mikuláš Teich, 175–92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Kennedy, James C. “Religion, Nation, and European Representations of the Past.” In *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, edited by Stefan Berger, and Chris Lorenz, 104–34. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008.
- [Koch-Lubouchine, Marina]. “Avant-propos.” In Strycek, Alexis, *Souvenirs*, 5–8. Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2022.
- Kohlbacher, Jan, Ludo Loos, Johan Kusters, Pollie Gregoor, and Flor Vanloffeld. *Het Russisch kamp: de kampen bij de Limburgse mijnen 1942–1965* [The Russian camp: The camps at the Limburg mines 1942–1965]. Eindhoven: Stichting erfgoed, 1998.
- Lamberts, Emiel. *The struggle with Leviathan: Social responses to the Omnipotence of the State, 1815–1965*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016.
- Lease, Gary. “Vatican foreign policy and the origins of Modernism.” In *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, edited by Darrell Jodock, 31–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Luyckx, Lieselotte. “Russische krijgsgevangenen van de nazi’s: van *Displaced Persons* tot vluchtelingen (voor het Sovjetcommunisme)” [Russian prisoners of war: From displaced persons to refugees (from Soviet Communism)]. *Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis / Revue belge d’histoire contemporaine* 40, no. 3 (2010): 489–511.
- [Maréchal, René]. “In memoriam: le Père Alexis Strycek.” *Paroisse catholique de rite byzantin Saint-Irénée de Lyon. Bulletin paroissial* 31–32 (2013): 52–54.
- Model, Serge. “L’église orthodoxe russe face à la Deuxième Guerre mondiale.” *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 289, no. 1 (2023): 115–32. doi : 10.3917/gmcc.289.0115
- “Nagrada nashla geroia” [The award has found its hero]. *Sibirskaia katolicheskaia gazeta*, June 1, 2010. <https://sib-catholic.ru/nagrada-nashla-geroya-2/>

- Nedosekin, Pavel. “Istoriia Sviato-Troitskogo prikhoda Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi v Sharlerua” [The history of the Holy Trinity Parish of the Russian Orthodox Church in Charleroi]. In *Russkoe Pravoslavie v Belgii*, edited by E. N. Egorova, vol. 1, 151–74. Moskva–Brussel: Conférence Sainte Trinité du Patriarcat de Moscou–Ekaterinskii muzhskoi monastyr, 2013.
- Niv’er, Antuan. *Pravoslavnye sviashchenoslužbiteli, bogoslovy i tserkovnye deiateli russkoi emigratsii v Zapadnoi i Tsentral’noi Evrope 1920–1995* [Orthodox clergy, theologians, and church figures of the Russian emigration in Western and Central Europe 1920–1995]. Moscow–Paris: Russkii Put’–YMCA-Press, 2007.
- Olmsted, Hugh. “Two Exiles: the Roots and Fortunes of Elie Denissoff, Rediscoverer of Mikhail Trivolis.” In *The new Muscovite cultural history: A collection in honor of Daniel B. Rowland*, edited by Valerie Kivelson, Karen Petrone, Nancy S. Kollmann, and Michael S. Flyer, 223–37. Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2009.
- Pauwels, W. “Sovjetkampen in België. Een ongekend verhaal?” [Soviet camps in Belgium: An unknown story?]. *Biekorf*, no. 1 (2006): 68–75.
- Pettinaroli, Laura. *La politique russe du Saint-Siège (1905–1939)*. Rome: Publications de l’École française de Rome, 2015.
- Put, Jean. *Russische kriegsgevangenen in Limburg 1942–1945: Leven en werken in oorlogstijd* [Russian prisoners of war in Limburg 1942–1945: Life and work during wartime]. Beringen: Heemkundige Kring van Beringen en Beverlo, 2002.
- Rigaux, François. “De Visscher, Charles.” In *Nouvelle Biographie Nationale*, vol. 5, 130. Brussels: Académie Royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique, 1999.
- Salas Fernández, Manuel F. “Alberto Hurtado: a biographical study of his Jesuit training, 1923–1936.” PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2016.
- Simon, Constantin. *Pro Russia: the Russicum and Catholic work for Russia*. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2009.
- Simon, Constantin. “Slováci v Russicu: 1929–1940” [Slovaks in the Russicum: 1929–1940]. Unpublished manuscript.
- Strichek, Aleksei. *Avtobiografiia riadovogo iezuita ottsa Alekseia Stricheka: Avtobiografiia napisana po zhelaniiu nastoiatelei* [Autobiography of Jesuit Father Aleksei Strichek: Autobiography written at the request of his superiors]. Novosibirsk: s.n., 2009.
- Strichek, Aleksei. *Rukovodstvo po russkomu udareniiu: sklonenie i spriazhenie* [Handbook of Russian emphasis: declension and conjugation]. Paris: Piat’ Kontinentov, 1966.
- Strycek, Alexis. “La révolution de 1905 et les libertés religieuses.” In *1905: La première révolution russe*, edited by François-Xavier Coquin, and Céline Gervais-Francelle, 45–51. Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1986.

- Strycek, Alexis. *La Russie des Lumières: Denis Fonvizine*. Paris: Librairie des cinq continents, 1976.
- Strycek, Alexis. *Souvenirs*. Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2022.
- Strycek, Alexis, and Marina Lubouchkine. *Pratique du russe parlé*. Paris: Hachette Education, 1992.
- Tamigneaux, Nathalie. “Le Cardinal Mercier et l’ Aide belge aux Russes?” MA thesis, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1987.
- “Umer otets Aleksei Strichek” [Father Aleksei Strichek has died]. *Sibirskaiia katolicheskaia gazeta*, August 11, 2013. <https://sib-catholic.ru/umer-otec-aleksej-strichek-2/>
- Venken, Machteld, and Idesbald Goddeeris. “The Nationalization of Identities: Ukrainians in Belgium, 1920–1950.” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 31 (2006): 89–115.
- Warditz, Vladislava Maria, and Wim Coudenys. “Slavic Studies as Migrant Knowledge: The Case of Max Vasmer.” *Migrant Knowledge*, July 22, 2021. <https://migrantknowledge.org/2021/07/22/slavic-studies-as-migrant-knowledge/>
- Westermann, Andrea, and Onur Erdur. “Migrant Knowledge: Studying the Epistemic Dynamics That Govern the Thinking in and around Migration, Exile, and Displacement.” In *Histories of Migrant Knowledge: Transatlantic and Global Perspectives*, edited by Andrea Westermann, and Onur Erdur, 5–18. Bulletin of the German Historical Institute. Supplement 15. Washington: German Historical Institute, 2020.
- Wollants, Arthur, and Jos Bouveroux. *Russische partizanen WO II-Limburg*. Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1994.