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

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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 identities 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

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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.”
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...

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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).
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

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10 Stríček, Avtobiografiia, 7; Cf. Stryček, Souvenirs, 24.
12 Pettinaroli, La politique russe.
13 Green and Viaene, Religious 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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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)\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{Mortalium Animos}, 1928), as well as the importance of the teaching of Oriental liturgy and culture in Catholic universities and seminars (\textit{Rerum Orientalium}, 1928). The latter led to the creation of the Collegium Russicum, the management of which was entrusted to the Jesuit Order.\textsuperscript{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

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\item \textsuperscript{15} https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/la/apost_letters/documents/hf_l-xiii_apl_18941130オリエンタル・ディニタス.html. On the history of Unionism, see Aubert, \textit{Le Saint-Siège et l’union des Églises}; Fouilloux, \textit{Les catholiques et l’unité chrétienne}; Baumer, \textit{Von der Unio zur Communio}.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Simon, \textit{Pro Russia}; Pettinaroli, \textit{La politique russe du Saint-Siège}.
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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

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¹⁸ ARSI Russicum.
²⁰ Strichek, Avtobiografiia, 8.
²¹ Strichek, Avtobiografiia, 11–13; Personal file Aloisius Strýček, ASPEMCG.
²³ Strichek, Avtobiografiia, 13–14; Personal file Aloisius Strýček, ASPEMCG.
According to his personal file, his performance as a praefectus was “cum mediocri satisfactione.” As a language teacher, however, he qualified “cum optima satisfactione.” 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. 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. 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 Coq (Provincial) to Mailleux (St. Georges), 28/7/1938. AFSI, Institut Saint-Georges Meudon (E-Me), Box 3; Le Coq to Nilis (Sûreté publique), 12/9/1938. BSA F 1650 (Police des Étrangers), Personal File A313533 Strycek L.
25 Personal file Aloisius Stryček, ASPEMCG.
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 college there were Catholic priests of the Eastern rite.\(^ {30}\) Every day, Father Victor [Richter, 1899–1976] and Father Dimitri [Kuz’mín-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,

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29 Ledóchowski to Le Coeq, 31/5/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.
32 Nedosekin, “Istoriia Sviato-Troitskogo prikhoda.”
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 Mailleux) 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 Mailleux\(^ {37}\)), 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. Mailleux 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 Mailleux, 28/7/1938. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.
\(^{38}\) Mailleux to Le Cocq, 8/9/1938. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.
\(^{39}\) Mailleux to Tisserant, 20/4/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 7.
\(^{40}\) Mailleux to Le Cocq, 27/8/1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 3.
\(^{41}\) Mère Saint François de Sales Michaux to Mailleux, 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? 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 František Przewleky (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. Soon afterwards, however, it was decided to move the college to Paris, as most of the pupils were living in the French capital. In 1941, Mailleux, Kuzmin-Karavaev, and Przewleky were permitted to leave Belgium, and Richter was allowed to leave in 1942. Strýček remained in Belgium to pursue his Jesuit training.

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. 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).

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

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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.
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 nd Rouleau, “L’histoire de Saint-Georges. De Constantinople à Meudon,” 25–26; Stryck, Souvenirs, 56; Strichkek, Autobiografia, 19.
46 Strycek, Souvenirs, 56–57.
the Foyer Universitaire Slave in de rue de Malines (Mechelsestraat) or Russians living in Louvain.\textsuperscript{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);\textsuperscript{49} Ilia Denisov (1893–1971), who in 1943 defended a groundbreaking dissertation on Maximus the Greek (Maksim Grek, 1470–1556),\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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).\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{53} This was the context (described vaguely and misleadingly in Strýček’s memoirs)\textsuperscript{54} in which a new (and adventurous) phase began in the life of the young Jesuit.

\textit{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.\textsuperscript{55} Many of these POWs fled when they got a chance. By the spring of 1943, the number of

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\item[51] Coudenys, \textit{Leven voor de tsaar}, passim. There is no proof, however, that Naryshkina-Witte ever lived in Louvain (BSA, F 1650, Personal File 1171591 Naryschkine C.), and neither that she had become a Catholic. This also suggests that Strýček’s memoirs may not be totally reliable.
\item[52] Niv’er, \textit{Pravoslavnye sviashchenosluzhiteli}, 148–49.
\item[53] Coudenys, \textit{Leven voor de tsaar}, 254–56. On the history of the Russian Orthodox Church during World War II, see Model, “L’église orthodoxe russe.”
\item[55] Put, \textit{Russische krijgsvangers} 31–78; cf. also Wollants and Bouveroux, \textit{Russische partizanen}; Kohlbacher et al., \textit{Het Russisch kamp}.
\end{itemize}
Soviet POWs had risen to some 250, about 5 percent of the total.\footnote{Put, Russische krijgsmannen, 225; Wollants and Bouveroux, Russische partizanen, 19.} 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.\footnote{Strycek, Souvenirs, 61; Strichek, Artobiografiia, 20; Wollants and Bouveroux, Russische partizanen, 138. Cf. also Put, Russische krijgsmannen, 79–80.} 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.\footnote{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.} By the end of December, Strýček had made arrangements to visit the Waterschei patients,\footnote{J. Thoelen (parish priest of Waterschei) to Strýček, 23/12/1942. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.} and he had even found others who delivered parcels on his behalf.\footnote{A. Godin SJ (Liège) to Strýček, 31/12/1942 & 23/2/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.} 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.”\footnote{E. Gessler SJ to Strýček, 13/4/1943 & 26/6/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.} 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.\footnote{Cf. Edm. Pol [illegible] (Boussoit) to Strýček, 18/3/1943 and H. De Visscher (Châtelineau) to Strýček, 22/2/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.} 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.\footnote{M. Semënov 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.} 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.\footnote{A. Osip to Strýček, 20/7/1943, 29/7/1943, 28/8/1943, 8/9/1943. AFSI, DP, Folder 2. Cf. Put, Russische krijgsmannen, 300–1.} 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
network. More than once, she had to urge Strýček to keep a low profile so as not to give away the network. A similar warning was issued by Anatoli Khristalov, 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].” 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. Although these émigrés would later claim that the Limburg escape route was an integral part of their network, there are strong indications that this was not exactly the case. 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.

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.” The religious theme would surface in many a letter, and this was clearly the kind of information Strýček was seeking. Some three

67 M. De Roover to Strýček, 13/1/1944; Feshchenko to Strýček, 15/2/1944. AFSI, DP, Folder 2.
69 Wollants and Bouveroux, Russische partizanen, 134–43; Coudenys, Leven voor de taan, 270–273.
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 (tovarishe) 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.\(^\text{72}\)

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.”\(^\text{73}\) 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.\(^\text{74}\)

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.”\(^\text{75}\) 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.
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).

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. 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.”

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. 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. 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
.it/?p=1.
81 A. Tugarinova to Strýček, 3/2/1945, 25/2/1945, 5/3/1945, s.d. AFSI, DP, Folder 2. Turganinova 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 Sécours aux enfants russes 1930–1935); Projet d’un Internat pour filles en
1939. AFSI, E-Me, Box 4.
83 Strýcek, 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. Ghyselinck (commander of the communist resistance organization
Onafhankelijkheidsfront) to “Chères Kamerades” [sic] about his return to civil life, 11/10/1944. AFSI, DP,
Folder 2; Strýcek, 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. 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. 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. This ranged from a welcome to the US troops (“we are very happy to see our Allies in our home”) in early September 1944 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.

87 Strycek, 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”?92

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 (Tonia) 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 Strycek, Souvenirs, 89–90.
91 Personal file Aloisius Stryček, 1950. ASPEMCG.
92 Report, s.d. 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, Stýček 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

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95 Simon, *Pro Russia*, 469.
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 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).

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 protegees 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 Kamenc, “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-Aleksie-Aleksis 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.

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