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Monika Vrzgulová
the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia

THE CLUB OF SENIOR CITIZENS WHO SURVIVED THE HOLOCAUST: A CASE STUDY FROM SLOVAKIA[1]

by Monika Vrzgulová

Monika Vrzgulová is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia. She was educated at the Comenius University, Faculty of Philosophy, where she received the PhDr degree in ethnography and obtained the CSc (PhD.) degree from the Slovak Academy of Sciences. From 2005-2017 she also led the Holocaust Documentation Center in Bratislava. She is the author of six books and over 80 papers published in specialized journals in Slovakia and abroad. In 2018 she was the Visiting Fellow at the Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies in U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Her research interests include the representation of the Holocaust in present-day Slovakia, communication of the past between generations, and politics of memory after the fall of communism**.**

Abstract

This paper chronicles the process of how an informal group of Holocaust survivors in Bratislava organized into a senior citizens club that gradually evolved into a source of civic activism directed at the majority of society. Based on qualitative research: repeated interviews with survivors in Bratislava about their experiences of the Holocaust and the Communist era, which the author has carried out from 1995 to the present. It also draws on other data acquired during discussions at the Senior Citizens Club (2005–2017) and active observations of the survivors as civic activists engaged in public discourse and educational events for the youth in 2006–2019.

Introduction

This paper examines the role of Holocaust survivors in the renewal of Jewish community life in Slovakia following the collapse of the Communist regime in November 1989. Since the mid-1990s, I have been coming into contact with various members of the Jewish community in various capacities, which has allowed me to observe how an informal group of Holocaust survivors

[1] This paper emerged in collaboration with the VEGA 2/0047/21 project, *Človek v nedemokratických režimoch. Roky 1938-1989 v pamäti slovenskej majority a židovskej komunity. Etnologický pohľad.* [People in Non-Democratic Regimes. 1938-1989 in the memory of the Slovak majority and the Jewish community. An ethnological perspective], which is being carried out at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

in Bratislava organized into a senior citizens club[2] which then gradually evolved into a source of civic activism directed at the majority society. This paper chronicles that evolution while also examining the relationship of the Bratislava Jewish Religious Community (JRC), other members of the community and the majority society to Holocaust survivors. The paper is based on qualitative research: repeated interviews with survivors in Bratislava about their experiences of the Holocaust and the Communist era, which I have carried out from 1995 to the present. It also draws on other data I acquired during discussions at the Senior Citizens Club (2005–2017) and while actively observing some of the survivors in the role of civic activists engaged in public discourse and educational events for the youth in 2006–2019.

My Path to Holocaust Survivors

In 1995–1997, I participated in the international research project "Oral History: The Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust," which was coordinated by Yale University. It was the first qualitative research project focused on the life stories of Holocaust survivors from Slovakia, and it was only launched after the fall of the Communist regime.[3] The would-be interviewers first underwent historical and methodological training. The philosophy of the project was promoted by its architect, Professor Geoffrey H. Hartman, the founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, which, in the second half of the 1990s, came to include video interviews with survivors from Slovakia. Professor Hartman's idea was that the interviewers should listen to the witnesses and give them space to speak of their own accord. We were expected to capture the interviewees' life stories. At the same time, the project was aimed at rekindling social dialogue with people affected by the Holocaust and reintegrating them into everyday life, which, in a post-Communist society, represented a rather significant challenge.[4] In Slovakia, the project was carried out under the auspices of the Milan Šimečka Foundation (MSF), based in Bratislava.[5] After the

[2] Over time, the JRC Senior Citizens Club changed its name to the Club of Senior Citizens Who Survived the Holocaust, which illustrates the centrality of the Holocaust to their identity as well as the need for its reflection in the community and society at large.

[3] The project marked the beginning of the Era of the Witness—Anette Wievorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Cornell University Press 2006)—in Slovakia. The first author to discuss it was Peter Salner in *Prežili holokaust* [They Survived the Holocaust] (Bratislava: VEDA 1997).

[4] Geoffrey H. Hartman, the architect of the project, describes the techniques and principles of leading an oral history interview with a Holocaust survivor in his book *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 133 onward.

[5] The foundation is named for the dissident/philosopher Milan Šimečka (1930–1990). Established in 1991, it is one of the oldest NGOs in Slovakia. To this day, it focuses its activities on sensitizing Slovak society to issues concerning

breakup of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic and the founding of the independent Slovak Republic (January 1, 1993), whose very name reminded them of the wartime state and the Holocaust, the survivors reckoned that a nongovernmental organization was more trustworthy than institutions of the state. The overall credibility of the project was based largely on the moral credit of the individual researchers: sociologists, ethnologists, psychologists, journalists, and activists.[6] A little later, the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation also began to film similar video interviews with survivors from Slovakia. At present, the material from both projects is available online to experts as well as the wider public. The projects differed in terms of methodological nuances and interviewing techniques, which necessarily had an impact on their outcomes. Gradually, they became the subject of scholarly analysis.[7]

Self-Reflection

To this day, I still remember the feeling I had sitting down for my first interview with a Holocaust survivor. It was a feeling of awe, respect, and curiosity, but also of some doubt about whether I was sufficiently qualified for the task. I was only just becoming acquainted with the research method and, more importantly, the subject matter of the project which dealt with people's painful and tragic memories of the past; memories that were decisively different from my own family history. From the very beginning, the interviews were based on a mutual recognition of their importance and, to an even greater extent, on personal relationships and trust. When reaching out to the survivors, the interviewers made use of our social networks: friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and various contacts. The social capital of each member of the research team was a precondition to the successful execution of the project. To publicly relate one's story (often for the first time) in an improvised studio[8] or (sporadically) the privacy of one's home, frequently to people from the majority who were a generation or two younger, required great determination and even greater trust. At the start, it was not easy. "You're not one of us, are you?" This question was

the country's nondemocratic past as well as more current issues having to do with the acceptance of diversity in Slovak society. For more, see www.nadaciamilanasimecku.sk.

[6] Initially, the interviews were led by 20 interviewers, one of whom was the sociologist Martin Bútora, who would later become Slovak Ambassador to the United States. The team also included the eminent ethnologist Peter Salner and the pioneering Holocaust historian Ivan Kamenec. The team members summarized their reflections on the project in Monika Vrzgulová (Ed.), *We Saw the Holocaust* (Bratislava: Milan Šimečka Foundation 2005).

[7] See, for example, Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony. The Modern Jewish Experience.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

[8] Set up at the SAS Institute of Ethnology in Bratislava, in local JRCs, or elsewhere.

put to me (or it was implicitly thought) by many of those I interviewed throughout the project.[9] They were not wrong–I really was not "one of them." My family had never faced persecution or deportation because of its ethnic origin. At the time, I only had fragmentary information about the Holocaust, as, under Communism, the Shoah and the fate of Jews from Slovakia had been taboo. I would gradually make the acquaintance of ever-increasing numbers of survivors, forging fragile bonds that steadily grew stronger.[10]

My contacts with the interviewees did not end with the filming of the interviews. We first met again during the ceremonial handover of the videotapes. On this occasion, we informed our research partners about the progress being made in the project and discussed the situation in the country. The ostensibly formal gatherings would quickly take on more casual contours. At the first such gathering, I felt that the survivors who did not know me from our interviews, or from my hometown, were trying to discern who I was. I also noticed that survivors who had a similar experience of the Holocaust tended to band together. Some of the groups consisted of people who had been through Auschwitz-Birkenau or other Nazi extermination camps, others of people who had been thrown into labor and concentration camps in Slovakia (Nováky, Sereď, Vyhne, and others),[11] and still others of people who had done forced military service in the 6th Labor Battalion. Those outside of these groups had saved themselves by either going into hiding or assuming false "Aryan" identities in Slovakia or abroad.[12] The different modes of survival (collective and individual) had also had a bearing on the survivors' reflections of their experiences in our interviews.[13] After the end of the project, which, aside from having had a formative effect on my professional development, had also been a kind of initiation, I was active in academic research and

[9] Monika Vrzgulová, "But you aren't one of us, are you?", in: Monika Vrzgulová (ed.) *We Saw the Holocaust* (Bratislava, MSF 2005), pp. 110–131.

[10] Monika Vrzgulová, "The Oral History Interview–A Relationship and Space of Trust". In: *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology*, 67, 4 (2019), pp. 430–440. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2019-0025.

[11] Joseph R. White and Mel Hecker (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945. Volume III*, Camps and Ghettos under European Regimes Aligned with Nazi Germany. (USHMM, Indiana University Press 2018), pp. 874-876, 878-879, 881-883, 887-888, 889-890.

[12] The survivors were living archetypes of different fates and stories–different manifestations of the Holocaust as it took place in the territory of present-day Slovakia. In the country, the tragedy unfolded in three versions, depending on which jurisdiction its regions and localities fell under in the given historical era. The first version had to do with the Wartime Slovak State and its anti-Semitic policies; the second with Horthy's Hungary; the third with Nazi Germany. The Museum of the Jewish Community in Bratislava (a nonpublic institution) highlighted the existence of these three versions of the Holocaust with a 2015 exhibition and catalogue. Borský Maroš et al., *Engerau. The Forgotten Story of Petržalka* (Bratislava: Menorah 2015).

[13] Peter Salner, "Visible as a man, yet invisible as a Jew", *Human Affairs*, 29, 2019, 1, pp. 95-107.

the nongovernmental sector. Until 2005, as part of the MSF's educational activities, I worked on the implementation of the research findings into informal education. In 2005–2017, as the director of the Holocaust Documentation Center (HDC),[14] I worked closely with several Holocaust survivors. Our relationships continued to evolve not just professionally but also socially, at events held in the Bratislava JRC community center or in private. Both organizations, the MSF and the HDC, were headquartered on the premises of the community center. Around the year 2005, I also began regularly meeting with the survivors as a guest of the Senior Citizens Club. This marked the start of a new stage in the cultivation of our relationships, which continues to this day.

The Revival of the Jewish Community After 1989[15]

In Slovakia, November 1989—the collapse of the Communist regime—is linked with many new beginnings. One of them was the revival of Jewish community life[16] in Bratislava and the country as a whole. The Bratislava Jewish community, like the communities in other cities, was represented by a Jewish Religious Community (JRC) on the local level[17] and the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities (CUJRC) on the national level. After the fall of Communism, both institutions began to operate freely, without public or secret oversight.[18]

The oldest generation of the Jewish community in Slovakia was made up of Holocaust survivors, who represented a physical link between the pre-Holocaust past and the post-revolutionary present. In the 1990s, the collective memory paradigm in Slovakia began to shift,

[14] This civil society association was founded in 2005 in Bratislava as an affiliated organization of the CUJRC.

[15] Peter Salner is one of several authors who have explored this issue in depth, both in his papers and, principally, in the book Peter Salner, *Židia na Slovensku po roku 1989. Komunita medzi budúcnosťou a minulosťou* [Jews in Slovakia Since 1989. The Community between the Past and Present] (Bratislava: Veda, 2018).

[16] Peter Salner writes that "the environment of the Bratislava community does not have the character of a permanent ghetto, but it does, for a limited time, provide temporary 'shelter'". He calls it a "dispersed community". P. Salner, *Židia po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], pp. 27-28.

[17] In 1990, there were 15 JRCs in Slovakia. Over time, their number dwindled to 11. Peter Salner, Jewish Identity after Shoah. *PaRDes,* 2010, Heft 16, Geographical Turn, pp. 117-133, p. 129. At present, according to the CUJRC, there are 12 registered communities in the country. See: https://www.uzzno.sk/zidovske-obce.

[18] Although the CUJRC was founded as early as 1945, the first free elections into its representative assembly were only held in 1990, which was also when the Union began to monitor the actual number of members in the individual JRCs across Slovakia. See P. Salner, *Židia po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], p. 39. During the Communist regime, members of the Jewish community had been targeted by the secret service. Ján Hlavinka, "Židovská komunita pod kontrolou." [The Jewish Community Under Control]. In: *Pamäť národa* 2, (2005), pp. 20–32. Ivica Bumová, "Postoj ŠtB k emigrácii československ. občanov v rokoch 1963–1983 (s dôrazom na Západoslovenský kraj") [The Attitudes of the Communist Secret Service to the Emigration of Czechoslovak Citizens in 1963-1983 (with an emphasis on Western Slovakia)]. In: Daniel Luther (Ed.) *E/Migrácie a Slovensko* [E/migrations and Slovakia] (Bratislava: SAS Institute of Ethnology, 2006), pp. 41-74.

with society undertaking a re-evaluation and reconstruction of representations of the past, including of the Shoah. The personal stories of individual members of the Jewish communitbegan to gain their rightful place in public and expert discourse. Partly thanks to their oldest members, Jewish community institutions and organizations were gradually increasing their credibility and (especially in the beginning) symbolic capital.[19]

In the late 1990s, the activities of the Bratislava JRC (and other JRCs across Slovakia) were mostly aimed inward–at the community itself. It was only in time that the community began to restore and cultivate its social ties with the majority. During this period, international Jewish organizations[20] played an instrumental part in the renewal of Jewish community life. Many activities were carried out on the independent initiative of community members.[21] Legislative developments, which gradually transformed the legal environment, and thus also heightened the credibility of Jewish community institutions, also played a positive role. [22]

In 2000, the ethnologist Peter Salner, who was also President of the Bratislava JRC between 1996 and 2013, said that "at present, the Jewish community can be defined as a group of people of Jewish origin or religious belief who openly profess their Jewishness (they view their

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital." In: John. G. Richardson, (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241-258, p. 243.

[20] The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JOINT), using the financial resources of Jews from the U.S., supported Jewish communities in the diaspora after the two world wars. It also had a branch in post-war Czechoslovakia. In the 1950s, JOINT workers in several Eastern Bloc countries were accused of espionage and summarily banished. In Czechoslovakia, these developments were tied to the show trial of Rudolf Slánský. Following the collapse of Soviet Communism, JOINT once again supported the reinvigoration of Jewish community life in post-Communist countries. Vanda Vitti, *Trans-Formationen jüdischer Lebenswelten nach 1989: Eine Ethnografie in zwei slowakischen Städten.* [Transformations of Jewish Life After 1989: An Ethnography of Two Slovak Cities] (Transcript 2015), p. 72, f. 27, p. 114. In the 1990s, JOINT also provided moral and financial support to the newly re-established JRCs in Slovakia. See P. Salner, *Židia po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], p. 41.

[21] Nearly everyone who remembers the early days of the Bratislava JRC's renewed community life will recall the events held by *Židovské fórum* [The Jewish Forum]. Its first gathering took place as early as December 1989, a mere month after the Velvet Revolution. The chief organizer and moderator, the Professor Dr. Pavel Traubner (himself a Holocaust survivor), gradually "unlocked" people, who then began to join and jointly develop the Bratislava JRC. The founder of the forum had the following to say about its beginnings: "'[The Forum] allowed many people to profess their identity openly and without fear–first, among their own kin, and later to the public. After an era of state-mandated atheism, it represented an effort to revive religious sensibilities and people's relationship to Judaism.' Naturally, the number of attendants fluctuated, but it was never lower than 30 and frequently surpassed 150 or 200 people. This depended on the theme of the individual gatherings, the personality of the host, and sometimes, even on the weather." See P. Salner, *Židia po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], pp. 43-44.

[22] Already in the first year of its existence (in 1993, after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia), the National Council of the Slovak Republic passed Act 282/1993 on the Mitigation of Certain Injustices Committed Against Churches and Religious Communities. The law entered into force on January 1, 1994, and brought vindication to the Jewish community. It also created a new responsibility stemming from the need to care for the restituted assets. Later, the law was amended by the Restitution Act 503/2003 and some other amendments. P. Salner, *Ž po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], p. 41.

relationship [to Jewish identity] differently and have different expectations and preferences regarding the "community" or "Jewishness" as such). What is important is the voluntary nature of this relationship, though I admit that, at practically every turn, there are pressures (positive and negative) on the side of the family, the Jewish community, the authorities, or the majority society."[23]

Holocaust survivors were a part of the Jewish community. They represented its natural (although sometimes modified) continuity–the continuation of Jewish life after the Holocaust and the Communist dictatorship. They were a relatively heterogeneous group (not only by virtue of their varied views on Jewish identity), bridging the pre-war Jewish world with the diversified present. After the Holocaust, many of them had stopped being religious, practicing Jews. They did not live according to the traditions of Judaism. They did, however, have other—social, cultural, emotional, or pragmatic—reasons to join the JRC after 1989. What they all had in common was their lived experience of the Holocaust, which was itself quite diverse.

The Standing of Holocaust Witnesses Within the Bratislava JRC

At the time of the aforementioned research project documenting the life stories of witnesses of the Holocaust (1995–1997), the CUJRC and the local JRCs (including the one in Bratislava) directed their activities at the oldest generation of their membership. This was aided by JOINT,[24] which encouraged and financed initiatives aimed at Holocaust survivors. The CUJRC founded a social relief department, and gradually, social relief committees also began springing up in JRCs across Slovakia. The Bratislava JRC founded its social relief department around the year 1994.[25] Enlisting the help of volunteers from the ranks of the survivors, its main role was to provide financial, social, and free-time care to elderly members of the community. In the beginning, it was necessary to determine the seniors' needs, which then dictated the forms of assistance, from securing medical care and medicinal supplies, or facilitating recreational breaks, to helping with everyday shopping, household cleaning, and providing daytime company. The newly built kosher eatery on the premises of the JRC community center offered not only lunches, but also a dignified

[23] Peter Salner, *Komunita medzi tradíciou a asimiláciou*. [Jews in Slovakia Between Tradition and Assimilation] (Bratislava: Zing Print, 2000), p. 11.
[24] Peter Salner, *Židia po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], p. 41.
[25] Jana Mielcarková ed, *Ľudia z Kile. Interviews.* [The People of Kile], (Bratislava. Jewish Cultural Institute; Bratislava JRC 2016), pp. 172-173.

space for social gatherings. In this regard, the founding of the (thus far only) retirement home for survivors, Ohel David, in Bratislava in 1998, was an important step.[26] For official Jewish institutions at the end of the 20th century, enabling the elderly to spend their old age in dignity was not just a declared but also an actual priority.

Another important step in establishing the Jewish community within broader Slovak society came with the adoption of the Agreement Between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities on the Partial Compensation of Holocaust Victims. For me, the adoption of the Agreement is indicative of the increasing social capital of Jewish notables in Slovakia at the time[27] and their connection to symbolic and, primarily, economic capital.[28] The Agreement resulted from years of negotiations between representatives of the Jewish community in Slovakia and abroad with high-ranking politicians. It significantly contributed to the development of Jewish community life as well as to the quality of the care provided to Holocaust survivors. Thanks to financial support from the CUJRC grant scheme, which was enshrined in the Agreement, various special interest clubs and NGOs aimed at different age groups within the community (not just the elderly) began to carry out their activities on the premises of the Bratislava JRC community center.[29]

[26] This had a practical as well as a symbolic meaning: the retirement home was started in a building that, prior to World War II, belonged to the Jewish community, having served as a boys' orphanage. Until 1995, it belonged to the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, housing the foreign police. Peter Salner, *Židia po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], p. 42. Tomáš Stern: Židovský starobinec. "Neodhoď nás v čase staroby: keď mizne naša sila, neopusti nás" [The Jewish Retirement Home. "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; Do not forsake me when my strength fails"]. *Kile*, 3, (2005), p. 8.

[27] The adoption of the Agreement was strongly supported by international Jewish organizations, such as AJC, JOINT, but also B'nai B'rith.

[28] The Agreement was signed on October 9, 2002, by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda and President of the CUJRC František Alexander. Based on the Agreement, the government opened a deposit account in the Slovak National Bank, and for ten years, the CUJRC could use the yields from the initial deposit amount to finance its activities. The Agreement also led to the formation of the Committee for the Compensation of Holocaust Victims in the Slovak Republic. Through its grant scheme, the CUJRC could fund the system of social and medical care for the survivors, as well as various social and cultural activities for younger generations of the Jewish community in Slovakia. The funds were also used to renovate Jewish cultural monuments, hold educational and commemorative events, and finance research and educational organizations focused on Jewish history, culture, and the Holocaust. See Peter Salner, *Židia po 1989* [Jews Since 1989], p. 41; Committee for the Compensation of Holocaust Victims in Slovakia: https://archiv.vlada.gov.sk/ludskeprava/24547/rada-na-odskodnenie-obeti-holokaustu-v-sr.html.

[29] They included special interest clubs and organizations that carried out activities for children (the Moadon camp) and youth (the Slovak Union of Jewish Youth), a book club, the Forum, B'nai B'rith, the Museum of the Jewish Community, and others. People who had survived the Holocaust as sheltered children were organized in Hidden Child Slovakia (1999), having branches in the cities of Bratislava and Košice. It is worth noting that these people barely ever visited the Senior Citizens Club, even though it was initially led by one of them–a sheltered child. That said, this peculiar fact and the organization as such are not the subject of this paper.

I was systematically following those activities while I was leading the Holocaust Documentation Center (2005-2017). This NGO, affiliated with the CUJRC, was headquartered at the community center, in the immediate vicinity of the JRC offices. Because I could watch the happenings at the JRC and the activities of its constituent parts and special interest organizations "from under the same roof," many of my findings stem from a targeted, involved, sometimes even casual observation and informal conversations with members of the Jewish community.

The Club of Senior Citizens Who Survived the Holocaust

At this point, it is useful to provide a more detailed characterization of Holocaust survivors in Slovakia in the 1990s. The half-century that had elapsed since the end of WWII had logically had an impact on reducing the size of the group, as had the four decades of Communist rule. As I have already mentioned, the Holocaust survivors who did not opt for emigration[30] were a diverse group. They were mostly brought together by their shared experience of the Holocaust (even though they had often spent the wartime years in very different circumstances). Just as their relationship to Judaism, faith, and Jewish identity were diverse, their experiences of the Communist regime were also quite varied. The survivor testimonies we gathered in the mid-1990s[31] articulated their views on Judaism and also spoke about the Communist past. Their memories make clear that, as a consequence of the Holocaust, many of them had tried to blend in with the majority, "living with a mask" or trying to assimilate, often becoming atheists. In this respect, the post-war absence of religious Jewishness in Slovakia, which represented a massive rupture between the Jewish past and present, certainly helped.[32] The majority of the survivors had been hopeful about the Communists' ascent to power (1948). Disillusionment came with the gradual harshening of the regime and the manifestations of anti-Semitism in its policies, which culminated in the 1952 show trial of Rudolf Slánský[33] as the purported leader of a Zionist

[30] Between 1945 and 1949, approximately one third of the survivors immigrated to Palestine/Israel. Robert Y. Büchler, "Znovuoživenie židovskej komunity na Slovensku po druhej svetovej vojne" [Revival of the Slovak Jewish Community after WWII] *Acta Judaica Slovaca*, 4, (1998), pp. 79–90; Chana Jablonková, "Izrael a Židia zo Slovenska" [Israel and Jews from Slovakia] *Acta Judaica Slovaca*, 4, 1998, pp. 163–186, p. 166. Another mass migration wave swelled up in response to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. According to JOINT data, 4,500 Jews left Slovakia at the time. Yeshayahu, A. Jelinek, *Dávidova hviezda pod Tatrami. Židia na Slovensku v 20. storočí*. [The Star of David Under the Tatras. Jews in Slovakia throughout the 20th century]. (Prague 2009), p. 421.
[31] All in all, 149 video interviews were made. Most of the survivors were then living in Bratislava.
[32] Peter Salner, "Jewish Identity after Shoah". *PaRDes*, 2010, Heft 16, pp. 117–133, p. 126.

[33] Rudolf Slánský was a high-ranking official of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. For more, see Peter Salner, "Emigration, Home, Identity: An Ethnological Examination of the Identity of Jewish Emigrants from

conspiracy center.[34] Keeping one's Jewish identity secret or even repudiating Jewishness entirely was not unusual. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Warsaw Pact (August 21, 1968), still more people of Jewish descent broke with the Communist Party. This era was characterized by a considerable wave of emigration from Czechoslovakia.

Most of the people who left were representatives of the second generation—the children of Holocaust survivors—and their parents.[35] It was not until the change in political circumstances in 1989 that they could visit or return to their country of birth.

At first, I had merely heard about the existence of the "Club of Senior Citizens Who Survived the Holocaust." I viewed it as a place that was closed to the general public, and indeed, it did function that way for a while because its purpose was primarily to create an attractive, safe space for the survivors. Gradually, the seniors, influenced by authority figures from within the community, gained confidence and began allowing "people from the outside" to scale the seemingly insurmountable walls surrounding the Club. Several of them followed the example of some of their peers who, already in the 1990s, had begun openly speaking about their fates; later, they were encouraged by the aura and authority of their leader.

The seniors had been meeting informally since 2001, before the Club was officially founded. In 2002, the JRC created a space in the community center for the oldest generation.[36] Initially, the Club's purpose was mostly social. It was a sort of refuge for people with a shared experience, helping them break out of their daily routine and loneliness. To people affected by the traumas of the Holocaust, as well as by the death or emigration of their relatives,[37] it provided a chance to discuss their experiences and troubles with those who were best equipped to relate to them. The initial freeform "schmoozing," which not everyone found particularly rewarding, gradually began to give way to a more structured agenda. This new structure was deliberately put

Czechoslovakia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 41, Iss. 2, Article 5, (2021) pp. 50–68, p. 63. Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol41/iss2/5/.

[34] Peter Salner, "Socialism and the Jewish Community in Slovakia", *Studia Etnologiczne I Antropologiczne*, *SEIA* 20, (2020), pp. 1-11, p.11.

[35] Peter Salner, "Emigration, Home, Identity", pp. 57-58.

[36] Eva Mosnáková: "Založenie Klubu seniorov" [The Founding of the Senior Citizens Club], *Bratislava – Kile* 7, 4 (2012), p. 2.

[37] As a consequence of the illegal emigration of their children, many people in Communist Czechoslovakia were stripped of any contact with their loved ones. See Peter Salner, "Socialism," *Studia Etnologiczne I Antropologiczne*, *SEIA* 20, (2020), pp. 1-11, pp. 8-9. https://doi.org/10.31261/SEIA.2020.20.09.; Salner, Peter (2021) "Emigration, Home, Identity", pp. 50-68.

together by one of the survivors, Mrs. Eva Mosnáková, herself a hidden child, who had become the leader and chief representative of the Club. With her enthusiasm and natural authority, she gradually gave a new dimension to the survivors' meetings. As she makes clear in her memoir, this was no simple task. The Club, as a safe space, was attended by seniors who were affected, to different degrees, not only by their experience of the Holocaust but also by their advancing age, worsening health, loneliness, and the inevitability of adapting to new social circumstances. Apart from holding regular meetings, some of the Club's members, with the help of the leader, tried to energize their peers. One of their work methods came in the form of unannounced visits to the members' homes, "popping over for a cup of coffee." These were intended to convince the seniors that they were not alone and prompt them to maintain their social habits. [38] This step significantly contributed to the formation of the Club's identity and the increased confidence of its members. Mrs. Eva was trying to create an environment where everyone would be able and willing to speak about their troubles. She recognized the therapeutic importance of such collective commiseration. The initial reactions were negative, and so the meetings maintained their primarily social character. It was only with time that the Club crystallized into a specific institution with a more-or-less stable, structured agenda. This qualitative change was also reflected by workers of the JRC's social relief department: "[…] the JRC provided the clubhouse. This is where the Daytime Senior Citizens Club takes place twice a week. We are hoping to hold more social and cultural activities."[39] This message appeared in the very first issue of the *KILE*[40] community magazine, published in 2005. The magazine also began putting out a regular column entitled *What's New in the Senior Citizens Club*, which included information about the agenda, invited guests, as well as the life stories and opinions of individual Club members.

The Club's Changing Profile

The members of the Club can be divided into three categories: 1. *Activists*–people who have actively shaped the Club and represented it and its members not just within the JRC but also in the wider public; 2. *active consumers*–the most numerous group consisting of regular attendees

[38] Mrs. Eva Mosnáková told me about this "anti-sweatpants commando," as it has been called by Peter Salner, during one of our phone calls, which we held on a weekly basis during the 2020 lockdown.
[39] *Kile,* 0, (2005), p. 3.
[40] *Kile*–Yiddish for a Jewish religious community. *Kehilla* in Hebrew.

who actively participate in the Club's events and discussions, though they are not involved in their organization; 3. *passive consumers.*[41]

Over time, the structure of the meetings became more solidified, and the Club began holding regular Club Wednesdays, which included visits by invited guests. The guests mostly came from within the community and appeared at the Club once a month, later every week. Among them were important representatives of cultural, political, and Jewish life. The broadening of social ties and connections undoubtedly increased the credibility and prestige of the Club and its members. At the same time, the community was also gaining more visibility.[42] It warrants saying that some of the Club's members did not particularly welcome this greater visibility because it violated the intimate environment which they so desired.

Although the beginnings were not easy, and the aforementioned conflict of visions about the opening up of the Club has to some extent persisted, its current leader, as well as most of the members, view its continued existence as a success.[43]

Senior Citizens Club–The Guests

The first guests of the Senior Citizens Club were not unknown or unfamiliar people. They were often employees, officials, and notables of the Bratislava JRC or other Jewish organizations. They spoke about their work and experiences, commented on current affairs, or simply conversed with the Club's members. Active discussions became a fixture of the Club's gatherings, encouraging re-invitation of the speakers and increasing the Club's credit. The meetings usually ended with lunch at the kosher eatery. Some people who first came to the Club as invited guests continued returning out of interest until they eventually became permanent "visiting members," participating in the Club's events and sometimes helping with their organization. The seniors from the Bratislava community established written and, later, personal contacts with their counterparts from the Jewish Religious Communities in Brno (Czech Republic) and Vienna. As long as their health and overall condition allowed it, they would visit each other at least once a year. Their visits

[41] This classification was proposed to me by Peter Salner in an informal conversation in April 2020.
[42] Jana Mielcarková, *Ľudia z kile*, p.127.
[43] The activities of the Club were halted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which broke out in spring 2020. Today, its members are only in touch virtually thanks to Mrs. Eva, who is maintaining motivational online communication with them. The first meeting after the forced break is planned for August 26, 2021.

would be thought out to the last detail–from picking out interesting exhibitions in museums and galleries through concerts to tours around Old Bratislava or boat trips on the Danube.[44]

The gradual relaxing of the atmosphere and the survivors' increased willingness to speak about their stories can be linked to an event I helped organize. In 2007, the Holocaust Documentation Center (HDC) held an international conference on the Holocaust.[45] Apart from experts and researchers from diverse scientific disciplines, the seniors from the Club were also invited. They actively participated in the discussions, commenting on the presented scholarly findings and complementing them with their own stories and opinions. I am confident that their experience of the international forum, where they were viewed as specific kinds of experts on the subject matter, encouraged them to start speaking about their fates openly and publicly. After the conference I also held a retrospective event at the Club, entitled My Return Home After the Liberation. "The seniors had decided to speak out about the first moments following the Liberation of 1945. [The event was later] entitled *The Testimony of Those Who Survived the Holocaust*," informed the Club's leader.[46] This event was followed up by the psychologist and psychotherapist Michaela Hapalová. Drawing on her years of experience working with survivors and the second generation at the Rafael Institute in Prague, she demonstrated the extraordinary importance of openly communicating the trauma of the Holocaust as a therapeutic tool.

The Club Opens Up

In the early years of the 21st century the atmosphere in Slovak society with its ambition to join the European community, as well as its striving to adopt European values, translated into the overall mood in the Jewish community, and thus also in the Club. Among other things, this brought about greater openness in outward communication, represented by invitations to guests from the majority.[47] Over time the Club would see visits by notable academics (especially historians),

[44] Women members of the Senior Citizens Club have written an article about one such visit. For more, see Marta Szilárdová, Lucia Siváková, "Návšteva z Brna" [Visit from Brno], *Kile*, 1, 4 (2006), p. 4.
[45] The international interdisciplinary conference *Holocaust as a Historical and Moral Challenge* was held in Mojmírovce, Slovakia, on October 10-12, 2007. Among the participants were historians, social scientists, and psychotherapists from Slovakia, Austria, Israel, and the Czech Republic, as well as official representatives of Israel, Germany, and the United States.
[46] Eva Mosnáková, "Čo nového v Klube seniorov" [What's New in the Seniors Club], *Kile* 4, 2 (2008), p. 3.
[47] The opening up of the Club was, among other things, aided by the fact that the community was gradually modernizing its old premises. The new, renovated facilities (the kosher eatery, the clubhouse, the conference room) allowed for the invitation and dignified reception of majority guests.

translators, artists from Slovakia and abroad, as well as politicians. Ambassadors of Israel to Slovakia also gradually became regular guests, much like embassy workers from the United States, Germany, and other countries. Presidential candidates, human rights activists, public officials, writers, musicians, and artists also accepted the invitation to appear in the Club. The guests would pick the subject, and the seniors would discuss it with them. The seniors often surprised the guests with their views. The guests' willingness to come and talk to the members of the Club was proof of the increasing reach of the Club as an institution, which also magnified the public prestige of its individual members.

An important milestone in the history of the Club came with the visit of the writer Daniel Hevier in 2010, who summarized his impressions from the first meeting, which later evolved into a long-term collaboration, as follows: "You invited me here to speak, yet in the end, it was you who spoke to me. You also spoke with your silence, your meek smiles, and the spark in your eyes… I left here feeling stronger, empowered by your own strength."[48] Hevier and the cinematographer Vladimír Balco began regularly collaborating with the Club and began filming its activities as well as the life stories of its members, creating the documentary *Sila života* [The Power of Life]. In 2012, members of the Club made a public appearance on the 10th anniversary of the Club's founding. The event, held at a popular Bratislava theater, was open to people from within as well as from outside of the Jewish community. The seniors, figuratively and literally, stepped out of the comfort zone of the Club and related their stories to the wider public. The group communicative memory of the survivors thus gradually became part of the cultural memory and historical narrative of Slovak society as a whole.[49]

Senior Citizens Club–The Members

In the beginning, the Club brought together elderly members of the Bratislava JRC who shared a personal experience with the Holocaust. Nineteen years have passed since the Club's founding at the Bratislava JRC in 2002. The founders have given way to the younger generation, and gradually, more and more of the Club's current members were born after the Liberation. The makeup of the Club changes with the members' passing, deteriorating health, and departures for the Ohel David retirement home, though not for a lack of interest. Since the start, the group of

[48] Daniel Hevier: "Sila" [Strength]. *Kile* 6, 2 (2010), p. 3.
[49] Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 9-45.

seniors who survived the Holocaust was internally diverse. However, the most important thing that brought it together—the formative experience of having lived through the Holocaust—has remained. That is what defines the group's identity. The Bratislava seniors include people who are often separated by over 30 years in age. Their views on Jewish traditions and culture, in terms of their own identity, also differ. Still, they do not view this diversity as a problem. On the contrary, they find it compelling: "For me, the Club of Senior Citizens Who Survived the Holocaust is an important place where I meet my friends at interesting events and have the chance to compare their identity to my own," said one of the members.[50]

In her speech delivered on the 10th anniversary of the Club's founding, the leader said: "I think about what has happened, and I realize it wasn't just our success before the audience [at the theater], but rather the fact that we have successfully overcome the supposed barrier of passivity in old age, which is normally considered insurmountable."[51]

In the second decade of its existence, the structure of the Club gradually began to change. At present, some of its attendants are people from the non-Jewish majority who share the values of the Club's members and confirm, with their presence, its public prestige and credibility.[52] Members of the second generation who have reached retirement age have also started coming to its gatherings.

Apart from its primary function, the Club also delivers two other benefits to its members. The first is the acceptance of their memories—the group memory of Holocaust survivors—by the majority society, and the second is the acceptance of seniors attempting to fulfil their own ideas about active aging. Thanks to their positive experience with opening up to majority guests, the members of the Club have gained greater confidence. They have confirmed that, despite their advanced age and minority status, they have the strength and the opportunity to speak out on current issues. By openly voicing their views and attitudes, they can enter public discourse and exercise an influence on public opinion. Their collective initiatives have included a joint letter to the chairman of *Matica slovenská*[53] (2007), criticizing his glorification of the president of the

[50] Speech by Alexander Bachnár delivered at the Club on the occasion of his 90th birthday. Eva Mosnáková, "Čo nového v Klube" [What's New in the Club], *Kile* 5, 3 (2009) p. 3.
[51] Mosnáková, Eva, "Čo nového v Klube seniorov?" [What's New in the Senior Citizens Club?] *Kile* 6, 4 (2010) p. 3.
[52] Bourdieu, *Forms of Capital*, pp.248-249.
[53] This national-revivalist association was founded in 1863 with the intention of safeguarding and nurturing the national life of Slovaks. In more recent times, it has attracted frequent controversy, mostly for its views on the Wartime Slovak State.

Wartime Slovak State, Jozef Tiso, a letter to the speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic (2017), denouncing the statements of an MP for the far-right party *Kotleba – Ľudová Strana Naše Strana* [Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia], and many others.[54] Numerous members have, in the name of the club or individually, given interviews to the media and spoken at public events about the Holocaust in Slovakia or about the current social and political situation in the country, and at educational events in schools. They have also actively taken a stance against anti-Semitism and attempts to whitewash the Wartime Slovak State (1939–1945) and its representatives.

Their activities can be defined as civic activism, which some theorists consider to be a new dimension of social capital.[55] Some of the Club's most notable personalities have been Lýdia Piovarcsyová,[56] Alexander Bachnár,[57] and Otto Šimko,[58] whose public activism precedes the Club's founding, and, of course, the leader of the Club, Mrs. Eva Mosnáková. Mrs. Eva has become the primary voice of the Club and its members, and in 2016–2020, she was an active member of the citizens' initiative *Zabudnuté Slovensko* [Forgotten Slovakia].[59] The other people

[54] "Otvorený list predsedovi Matice slovenskej v roku 2007 za jeho velebiaci postoj k osobe prezidenta vojnového slovenského štátu J. Tisa" [Open letter to the chairman of Matica slovenská from 2007 for his glorifying statements regarding the president of the Wartime Slovak State, J. Tiso], *Kile*, 2, 1 (2007), p. 3. The seniors also sent a congratulatory letter to the president of Israel on the 60th anniversary of the founding of that country, as well as the following letter to the speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, which was read at a council assembly on February 8, 2020: "Dear Mister Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. We, the undersigned, are deeply unsettled by the statements of MP Mizík aimed against the people who received the recent state decorations. [MP Mizík] has deeply violated and tarnished the constitutional law of the Slovak Republic, on which he swore an oath. A person like him should relinquish his mandate. In Bratislava, January 21, 2017. The Club of Senior Citizens Who Survived the Holocaust, JRC Bratislava." For more, see: https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Page.aspx?sid=schodze/informacia_denne_rokovanie_recnik&DIRowID=15292&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&CisSchodze=12&PersonKey=Duba%C4%8Dov%C3%A1.Viera&CPT=418&Datum=2017-2-8%200:0:0.

[55] Ján Ruman, "Sociálny kapitál: kritická perspektíva a nachádzanie optimálnej signifikácie" [Social Capital: Critical perspective and the search for optimal signification], In: *Studia Politica Slovaca*, 6, 1 (2013), pp. 24-40, p. 27.

[56] Glevická, "Dedička antikvariátu Steinerovcov prežila vojnu vďaka pestúnke, keď arizátor Ondrejov poslal jej rodičov do Osvienčimu" [The heiress of the Steiner bookshop survived the war thanks to her nanny after the Aryanizer Ondrejov sent her parents to Auschwitz], DenníkN, Príbehy 20. Storočia [Stories of the 20th Century], 9. 8. 2016 https://dennikn.sk/531876/dedicka-antikvariatu-steinerovcov-prezila-vojnu-vdaka-pestunke-ked-arizator-ondrejov-poslal-jej-rodicov-do-osviencimu/.

[57] "Deportovať sa nedáme, budeme sa brániť. Príbeh Alexandra Bachnára" [We won't just let them deport us. We will fight. The story of Alexander Bachnár], denník SME 11. 11. 2019. https://domov.sme.sk/c/22256933/deportovat-sa-nedame-budeme-sa-branit-pribeh-alexandra-bachnara.html.

[58] Dušan Mikušovič, "Partizán Otto Šimko: Osvienčim bol len vyvrcholením toho, čo sa začalo presádzaním spolužiakov na gymnáziu" [Resistance fighter Otto Šimko: Auschwitz was just a culmination of what began with the reseating of students in high school], DennikN 2. 1. 2017. https://dennikn.sk/635857/byvaly-partizan-otto-simko-naozaj-slobodny-som-az-teraz-v-starobe-vyznamenanie/.

[59] The citizens' initiative "Forgotten Slovakia: Open Debates about Extremism" was one of civil society's responses to the fact that Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia (Kotleba – Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS) entered the National Council of the Slovak Republic following the 2016 parliamentary elections. The party platform and the

comprising the Club are no less important. Their participation and interaction had helped create an atmosphere that prompted part of the seniors to speak out on public affairs. In this way, though perhaps somewhat inadvertently, they began fulfilling the concept of active aging.[60] The activities of the Club are followed by journalists, artists, scientists, teachers, and human rights activists, many of whom work with the seniors.[61] Several members of the Club have received state decorations awarded by the president of the Slovak Republic.[62]

Conclusion

The collapse of the Communist regime in November 1989 represented a new beginning for all inhabitants of Slovakia. The Jewish community in Bratislava, and in the country as a whole, experienced a comprehensive revival of Jewish life, with Holocaust survivors playing an important role. Despite their advanced age, deteriorating health, and other attendant problems, their standing within the Bratislava JRC has been exceptional since the 1990s. When it comes to providing moral and economic support to the seniors, an important role was played by international Jewish organizations, as well as by the leadership of the community and the changed societal situation in Slovakia.

The institutionalized gatherings of the eldest members of the community at the Club initially offered the seniors a chance for safe communication and gave them a reason to venture

statements of ĽSNS representatives evince a clear far-right bias. According to statistics, the party had won the support of a considerable number of first-time voters. Between 2016–2020, representatives of Forgotten Slovakia met with the citizens of almost 20 towns where the ĽSNS had gained more than 10 % of the vote among first-time voters. For more, see Monika Vrzgulová, "Forgotten Slovakia Civic Initiative: Talking Openly about Extremism. Parallel Monologues or a Discussion on Values?" In: *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 12, 1 (2018), pp. 140-149.

[60] Zora Bútorová (ed.), *Štvrtý rozmer tretieho veku. Desať kapitol o aktívnom starnutí* [*The Fourth Dimension of the Third Age. Ten chapters on active aging*], (Bratislava, IVO 2013), p. 8.

[61] For instance, at events and during campaigns held by NGOs such as *Ľudia proti rasizmu* [People Against Racism], HDC, Postbellum, and at debates of the Forgotten Slovakia citizens' initiative. Eva Mosnáková, "Aj my sme boli mladí a chceli sme žiť naplno, ale nie všetci sme prežili holokaust" [We, too, were young and wanted to live life to the fullest, but not all of us survived the Holocaust], DenníkN, Zabudnuté Slovensko blog 27.1.2017. https://dennikn.sk/blog/664587/eva-mosnakova-aj-my-sme-boli-mladi-a-chceli-sme-zit-naplno-ale-nie-vsetci-sme-prezili-holokaust/.

[62] Among the recipients were Alexander Bachnár, the resistance fighter and one of the commanders of the Jewish partisan unit fighting in the Slovak National Uprising (2014), the leader of the Senior Citizens Club, Eva Mosnáková (2018), and the resistance fighter Otto Šimko (2018). The latter two were recognized for their exceptional contributions to the development of democracy and the protection of human rights and freedoms. All three laureates can be rightfully included in the category of famous Holocaust survivors like Ellie Wiesel and other publicly active survivors across the world.

out of their homes and solitude among people with a similar fate. Gradually, the Club evolved into a place with a fixed agenda, and many of its members have become public personalities. The group was increasing its social credit and thus also the self-confidence of the members. Over time, the original, relatively isolated *community common experience* has come to represent a *community of shared experience and values*. This dynamic development has prompted some of the members to make collective as well as individual public appearances, which can be considered examples of civic activism. Not all members of the Club view their peers' public engagement in a positive light, this tension being a direct result of the heterogeneity of the group and the seniors' varying attitudes regarding the sharing of or silence about their fates, as well as a manifestation of concerns about latent or manifest expressions of antisemitism, which are still widespread in certain parts of Slovak society.

The opening up of the Club was undoubtedly expedited by the democratization of the societal atmosphere in Slovakia, which, among other things, brought with it a sense of safety. This is how the situation was viewed not only by members of the Club but also by workers of the Bratislava JRC responsible for the safety of their members. I would contend that this increasing openness reflects the fact that the Jewish community has begun to feel free in Slovakia. The historical sense of threat and distrust has receded to a point where the Club has begun inviting majority guests to appear at its gatherings. By making use of its social capital and the social ties of its members and the representatives of the community and their younger relatives, the Club has extended its influence beyond the boundaries of the community. The positive feedback to discussions at the Club and the example of some of the survivors' public appearances will encourage others to speak out about their fates, whether in the media or for NGOs focused on chronicling people's stories from the 20th century. The experiences of Holocaust survivors have entered public and media discourse and gradually become part of the cultural memory of Slovak society.

The civic activism of several members of the Club has been publicly recognized–they have been awarded prestigious state decorations. These also confirm and reaffirm the social capital of the Club's members, as well as of the whole Jewish community.

The story of the Senior Citizens Club affiliated with the Bratislava JRC documents that, with the right, serendipitous combination of circumstances in society and the community, and with the right personal cast, social capital can markedly increase even in groups that would otherwise

seem vulnerable by virtue of their age or health condition. What remains to be seen is if social capital tied to its original forebearers will vanish after the inevitable departure of the remaining survivors, or whether it has a "heritable" character and will consequently be available for use and further expansion by later generations of the Jewish community. This process is influenced by a host of variables related, among other things, to the ambitions and efforts of the community, which is why its future development is difficult to predict.

PS: I started writing this paper at a time of strict anti-pandemic measures having to do with the spread of the novel coronavirus (March-May 2020) and finished it after the second wave of the pandemic and the end of a protracted lockdown (beginning of August 2021), when all of society (not only in Slovakia) was gradually starting to return to normal life. The seniors from the Club, as one of the most vulnerable groups of the population, had become subject to public health measures adopted by the state and the Bratislava JRC.[63] Club gatherings (at least in-person ones) had stopped. Eva Mosnáková, the leader of the Club, with whom I have been having regular phone calls, recognized the importance of maintaining communication within the Club and between the members and their guests. She continued engaging people who had appeared or were scheduled to appear at the Club, and sent out weekly emails to the Club's members, relaying the guests' written and virtual greetings. She supplied the seniors with compelling articles on history, literature, and science, in addition to relaxation techniques and quality music. She broadened the Club's offerings to fill their days. At the same time, she maintained awareness about the seniors, vis a vis the majority society by constantly reproducing their social contacts and spoke about the members of the Senior Citizens Club on a Skype call with President Zuzana Čaputová.[64] Nevertheless, as she told me in one of our conversations,[65] Mrs. Eva is not sure if the Club will restart its activities and return to its pre-pandemic standard. For the oldest members, the long hiatus has been a difficult

[63] The response of JRC representatives to the pandemic is captured in Peter Salner, "Sviatok Pesach v dobe koronavírusovej pandémie (etnologická reflexia)" [Pesach in the time of the coronavirus pandemic (ethnological reflection)], *Národopisná revue*, 2 (2020) pp. 162-165, and Peter Salner, "Jewish Holidays in the Time of the Corona Virus Pandemic in Slovakia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40, Iss. 6, Article 9. (2020). Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss6/9.

[64] E. Mosnáková: "Som sama a nie som sama. Srdcom spolu" [I am alone and I'm not. Together in heart], 11. 4. 2020 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=622930775222312.

[65] Phone call with Eva Mosnáková, June 6. 2021.

challenge. Currently, Eva Mosnáková is preparing the first post-pandemic gathering of the Club, which is scheduled for August 26, 2021.

Translated from Slovak by Jakub Tlolka