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EMIGRATION, HOME, IDENTITY
AN ETHNOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF THE IDENTITY OF JEWISH EMIGRANTS FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA[1]

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Abstract

Stretnutie (The Meeting) is a group formed in October 2004 by Jewish emigrants from Bratislava (the capital of Slovakia) who fled Czechoslovakia following the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968. The original intention behind its founding was to hold a reunion that would bring together people who, forty years after emigrating, lived in Israel, in different states across Europe and North America, and in Australia. The meeting took place in May 2005 in Bratislava, drawing over 200 participants. Encouraged by this initial success, the group and its website continued its activities, and it remains operational to this day. This paper examines the early years of The Meeting's existence (2004–2009). Analyzing the correspondence on its website, it attempts to elucidate the rationale behind the group's creation, as well as the reasons for its persisting appeal and the emigrants' relationship to the country and milieu from which they fled.

Introduction

As history attests, the existence of Jewish communities in Eastern and Central Europe is inextricably tied to the phenomenon of emigration. For generations, Jews have responded to political or economic tumult by fleeing their country of birth and settling in a new homeland, recognizing that such tumult was often followed by the scapegoating and

[1] This paper emerged as part of the Slovak Research and Development Agency Project 16-0345, Current Images of Socialism. I dedicate it to Emil from Germany, a long-term moderator and soul of the website, who passed away suddenly on July 31, 2019.

punishment of "the Jewish culprits." In (Czecho-)Slovakia, the most recent wave of mass emigration was caused by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies on August 21, 1968.

Although the migration flows resulting from the invasion affected the whole of society, they had a particular impact on Jews. Between 1968 and 1971, some 4,500 members of the Slovak Jewish community opted to leave the country,[2] amounting to over 50% of the overall Jewish population. The experience of the Holocaust, as well as the situation after the Communists' ascent to power in February 1948, caused that, in August 1968, the question of fleeing the country was hotly debated in practically every Jewish family. Many of those who stayed would later regret their decision, aided by the state of torpor that Czechoslovak society entered during the normalization era (1970–1989) as well as by the fact that the relatives of emigrants were frequently faced with all manner of retaliatory mistreatment on the part of the regime[3].

In this paper, I analyze a specific group of Jewish emigrants to show how their relationship to their country of birth developed over time. I have chosen The Meeting as my sample. This group was founded in October 2004 on the initiative of Jewish emigrants from Bratislava who decided to organize "a reunion of Jews who, in the 1960s, used to meet at 'The Kitchen,'[4] at Zlaté Piesky,[5] and elsewhere" (Sonia, Toronto, October 15, 2004).[6,7] The group's eponymous website became a decisive instrument in the realization of this ambition. Its first "owner" was Yuri, a photographer from Toronto. After five years, he relinquished ownership of the site for personal reasons, but the group remains active to this day. This paper examines the early years of its existence, demarcated by Yuri's tenure (October 4, 2004 – April 30, 2009).

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[2] Yeshayahu Andrej Jelínek, *Dávidova hviezda pod Tatrami. Židia na Slovensku v 20. storočí* [The Star of David Under the Taras. Jews in Slovakia in the 20th Century] (Prague: Vydavateľstvo Jána Mlynárika, 2009), p. 421.

[3] See also Alena Heitlingerová, *Ve stínu holocaustu a komunismu. Čeští a slovenští židé po roce 1945* [In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism. Czech and Slovak Jews Since 1945] (Prague: G+G, 2007).

[4] This former canteen of the Bratislava JRC was a place where people could get kosher food, as well as an important communication hub for members of the community. Prior to 1989, the Kitchen often hosted assemblies, Seder suppers, and Hanukkah, Purim, and other holiday festivities. Between 1966 and 1968, the leadership of the community also allowed youth parties to be held on the premises.

[5] Eng. Golden Sands, a popular swimming lake in Bratislava.

[6] In keeping with the principles of GDPR, the authors of the individual contributions are here introduced by their given name, the country or city they currently live in, and the date when they submitted their email.

[7] In the translation, some quotations from the website are edited for the sake of clarity. Where possible, their (largely informal) tone is maintained.

Research Methods

Although I have lived my entire life in Bratislava, in 2005 I was admitted into the group. My membership allowed me to use various methods of observation, creating the conditions necessary for formal and informal interviews and granting me access to the email correspondence taking place on The Meeting's website. I should mention that the members of the group knew about my profession, were informed about my research, and consented to the (partially anonymized) publication of my findings. They positively reflected on my books[8] in which I discussed their meetings in Bratislava (2005) and Israel (2009). I presented the first book shortly after its release at a gathering of the group, which took place in 2007.

The so-called "big meetings" represent the pinnacle of the group's efforts, but in fact, they are merely the tip of the iceberg, because the bulk of the group's activity unfolds on the website. Its importance is illustrated by the fact that, during the chosen timeframe (January 5, 2004-April 30, 2009), it logged a total of 20,249 emails. That amounts to an average of 368 emails per month, a little over ten a day. The volume of emails and the fact that meetings are held regularly and draw a high number of attendees prove that the group carries special importance for its members.

The Prehistory of the Community

Before I present my own analysis, I will attempt to summarize the key historical events which have had a decisive impact on the Jewish community in Slovakia and on the lives of the group's members. First, I must mention the Holocaust.[9] Although this tragedy happened before most of The Meeting's members were born, many of them would come to discover, through experience, that its consequences persisted even after the defeat of Nazism and the liberation of Czechoslovakia.

In 1930, 136,737 people in the country subscribed to the Jewish faith.[10] Because of incomplete data and intense migration flows, it is not clear how many of them survived the

[8] See Peter Salner, *Budúci rok v Bratislave alebo Stretnutie* [Next Year in Bratislava, or The Meeting] (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2007) and Peter Salner, *Minulý rok v Jeruzaleme* [Last Year in Jerusalem] (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2010).

[9] From among the host of literature dealing with this issue, I will only mention three seminal works: Yeshayahu Andrej Jelínek, *Dávidova hviezda pod Tatrami. Židia na Slovensku v 20. storočí* [The Star of David Under the Tatras. Jews in Slovakia in the 20th Century] (Prague: Vydavateľstvo Jána Mlynárika, 2009); Ivan Kamenec, *Po stopách tragédie* [On the Trail of Tragedy] (Bratislava: Archa, 1991); Eduard Nižňanský, *Politika antisemitizmu a holokaust na Slovensku v rokoch 1938-1945* [Anti-Semitic Policies and the Holocaust in Slovakia in 1938–1945] (Banská Bystrica: Museum of the Slovak National Uprising, 2016).

[10] *National Census of the Czechoslovak Republic from December 1, 1930. Part One.* (Prague: State Statistical Office, 1934), p. 23.

Holocaust. According to Jelínek, it was no fewer than 15,000 and no more than 30,000.[11] Even the more optimistic one of these estimates implies that at least 106,000 Jews were murdered, meaning that only 21,8% of the pre-war membership of the community could have survived the war.

In 1945–1950 approximately a third of the survivors (over 10,000 people) made *aliyah* to Palestine/Israel.[12] Especially in smaller Slovak towns, this led to the dissolution of Jewish religious communities. In 1946 Slovakia was home to 79 such communities.[13] A decade later, only 54 remained.[14] Their number continued to decline after 1968, and by 1990 the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities (CUJRC) only comprised 12 constituent communities. Apart from emigration, the dwindling in numbers was also attributable to the community members' migrating to bigger cities and their reluctance to profess their Jewish identity in the circumstances created by the Communist system.

The Holocaust also affected the forms of the Jewish family.[15] The majority of survivors had to cope with the loss of their spouse or the death of their children, and they had to come to grips with the mental and physical consequences of their recent trauma. This led to new marriages (often unequal in terms of age, religion and social background), frequent adoption of orphans, as well as large numbers of newborns. In contrast to the past, the share of interreligious marriages also significantly increased. On the surface, Jewish families did not differ too much from the majority; however, upon closer inspection, there were several notable differences. From the perspective of future developments, the disruption of intergenerational continuity caused by the Holocaust had particularly devastating effects. The absence of the grandparents' generation (older people were disproportionately represented

[11] Yeshayahu Andrej Jelínek, *Dávidova hviezda pod Tatrami. Židia na Slovensku v 20. storočí* [The Star of David Under the Tatras. Jews in Slovakia in the 20th Century] (Prague: Vydavateľstvo Jána Mlynárika, 2009), p. 382.

[12] For more, see Ivica Bumová, "Postoj ŠtB k emigrácii československých 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. See also Chana Jablonková, "Izrael a Židia zo Slovenska" [Israel and Jews from Slovakia] In: *Acta Judaica Slovaca,* 4 (1998): 163-186.

[13] Yeshayahu Andrej Jelínek, "Zachráň sa, kto môžeš. Židia na Slovensku v rokoch 1944-1950" [Save Yourself if You Can. Jews in Slovakia in 1944–1950]. In *Acta Judaica Slovaca*, 4 (1998): 101.

[14] Minutes from a CUJRC assembly meeting, May 9, 1955.

[15] For more, see Peter Salner, *Židia na Slovensku medzi tradíciou a asimiláciou* [Jews in Slovakia Between Tradition and Assimilation] (Bratislava: Zing Print, 2000). See also Peter Salner, *Židia na Slovensku po roku 1945. Komunita medzi vierou a realitou* [Jews in Slovakia Since 1945. The Community Between Faith and Reality] (Bratislava: Veda, 2016).

among Holocaust victims) was acutely palpable,[16] as was the fact that part of the survivors did not talk to their children about their ethnic origin (or about the tragic fate of their forebears),[17] nor about Jewish affairs.[18] Some of the children would therefore only find out about their background during adolescence or adulthood, often under emotionally straining circumstances.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, represents another historical milestone. The subsequent exodus affected the lives of those who chose to flee as well as of those who stayed, and it sapped the vitality of the community in Slovakia.

Abroad, the emigrants had to contend not only with new, often decidedly unfamiliar life conditions but also with the harassment of Czechoslovak authorities. "Leaving the republic without permission" was considered a crime based on Section 109/1961 of the Penal Code: "1/ Whoever leaves the territory of the republic without permission shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of six months to five years, by reformatory measures, or by forfeiture of property. 2/ The same punishment shall be imposed on anyone who stays abroad without permission."[19]

Practically every "illegal emigrant" was indicted for "leaving the republic without permission" and convicted in absentia to between one and three years in prison. If they did not speak up against the regime while abroad, emigrants were given the opportunity, based on the 1975 Helsinki Accords, to "settle their relationships with it," but they had to pay a fine based on the level of education they had attained prior to emigrating.

The emigrants were forced to break off (or significantly limit) personal contact with their parents, siblings, and friends back in Czechoslovakia. Apart from those who fled, the regime also persecuted their relatives who stayed in the country. They had restricted access to certain professions and public offices, limited options for high-school and college education,

[16] The fact that Jewish children born in the early years after the Liberation did not know their grandparents differentiated them from their non-Jewish counterparts. Eva Umlauf describes how she felt when her classmates would go to spend their summer holidays with their "grandmas and grandpas" in the countryside – because she "had no relatives, let alone any grandparents that I could visit". Eva Umlauf, Stefan Oswalt, *Die Nummer auf deinem Unterarm ist blau wie deine Augen*. *Erinnerungen* [The Number on Your Forearm is as Blue as Your Eyes. Recollections] (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2016), p. 112.

[17] One peculiar example involves a family which long observed kosher dietary laws, even maintaining two separate sets of cutlery for meat and dairy, but nevertheless kept their Jewishness secret from their children. Ivica Bumová, "(Dis)kontinuita hodnôt jednej židovskej rodiny (v kontexte historických zlomov 1938/39, 1948, 1968, 1989)" [The (Dis-)continuity of Values in a Jewish Family (in the context of historical breaking points – 1938/39, 1948, 1968, 1989)]. In: Zuzana Profantová (Ed.) *Hodnota zmeny – zmena hodnoty. Demarkačný rok 1989* [The Value of Change – Changes of Values. 1989, the Demarcation Year] (Bratislava: SAS Institute of Ethnology, 2009), pp. 345-362.

[18] In a private conversation, Peter from Trnava told me that his mother had forbidden her father-in-law, Peter's grandfather, to talk to his grandson about Jewish history, culture, and faith.

[19] https://ibadatelna.cz/cs/slovnik/opusteni-republiky. Accessed March 18, 2020.

and minimum opportunities for travelling to the West. In the case of Communists, it was common for people to be expelled from the Party: *"My father had been an active member of the Party until he was kicked out (thank God) in 1970 because his son had betrayed the motherland and fled to Israel. […] When I congratulated him on the expulsion, he nearly killed me. It took a lot of effort to convince him that any dictatorial regime was evil and that conflating social-democratic sensibilities with Communism was actually a mistake"* (Pavel, Israel, December 2, 2007).

The Beginnings of "The Meeting"

Although Jewish emigrants from Bratislava had repeatedly expressed interest in meeting in informal conversations, the first concrete step was taken by Yuri from Toronto who, in October 2004, reached out to his childhood friend. The friend's response is listed as entry no. 1 in The Meeting's archive: *"Hi, Yuri. Good idea. That makes two of us. I'll try and get more people. It would be good if this site became a registration form for everyone thinking about coming to Bratislava in May. In the future, it could bring together all of our kin from the homeland"* (Viktor, Australia, October 5, 2004). Two days later, a new website was born: *"This is a website where everyone can register and where we'll publish bulletins about our meeting"* (Yuri, Toronto, October 7, 2004).

The group was founded nearly four decades after most of its members had emigrated, and 15 years after the Velvet Revolution. The message about the opportunity to reunite with old, often long-lost friends was met with positive feedback. About a month after its launch, the website contained 234 emails from Australia, Canada, Israel, the USA, and many European countries, including Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Yuri, the owner, appointed Emil from Germany as the moderator, and Emil retained his position until his untimely death.

In the beginning, the group only approached Jewish emigrants who had spent some part of their lives in Bratislava. A snowball effect caused people from other corners of former Czechoslovakia to also find out about the event. There were fears that opening up the meeting to other interested parties would take away from its intimacy. The moderator therefore called a vote: *"Do you want people from all over Slovakia to come to the meeting or just people who know each other from Bratislava?"* (Emil, Germany, October 22, 2004). The majority voted in favor of the expanded format, and the group thus opened up to a wider pool of potential participants. There was also discussion about the question of whether to invite people who had stayed in Slovakia. The organizers initially did not plan on involving the "locals," which goes to show what importance they ascribed to the shared experience with

emigration. It must also be said that they were operating under the assumption that people in Slovakia were in a comparably worse financial situation: *"Bar a few exceptions, asking the locals to chip in $50 is nothing but a pipe dream. Most of them won't pay, and they won't show up"*[20] (Yuri, Toronto, January 13, 2005). It was only in late January 2005 that the group opened up to non-emigrants.

The meeting in Bratislava (May 27 – 29, 2005) drew about 250 attendees from Europe, America, Australia, Israel, and, of course, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Most of the international participants had arrived in advance and also attended a garden party held in the courtyard of the Bratislava JRC community center during Lag BaOmer on the day before the official commencement of the meeting. The whole event was characterized by an emotional atmosphere.[21] The intensity of the feelings is illustrated by one of the many comments on the website: *"For years to come, we will look back at this momentous event with tears in our eyes. It was the kind of event that only takes place once in a lifetime. I hope we have many more meetings still ahead of us, and I am convinced that they will be successful wherever they end up being held. I hope that, thanks to this forum, our numbers will grow […] and that we will never lose touch again until the day we die"* (Ďuro, Haifa, June 1, 2005).

It quickly turned out that the optimism of the previous comment was well-founded: *"Even though the meeting in Košice took place a year later, with some people already having attended the premiere in Bratislava, there was still lots of hugging and kissing and recognizing and joy. Why is it so moving to meet people we have long forgotten, we never really knew in the first place, we never thought about in 40 years, we never really missed…?"* (Silvia, Germany, June 2, 2006).

Between 2007 and 2009, two more meetings were held. The way, and the atmosphere, in which they unfolded clearly confirmed that the website, as well as the face-to-face contact, were important to the members and to the group's existence.

I believe that the group's popularity is mainly caused by its homogenous (but simultaneously quite diverse) makeup. It comprises people who are committed to their Jewish identity (which is a condition of membership) and have a relationship to the faith, but the degree of (in)observance of Jewish traditions and holidays is everyone's private matter. From the perspective of age, most of the members were born between 1945 and 1955 (the "children

[20] Initially, the organizers were only planning to hold a soirée in Bratislava's swankiest hotel, the Carlton. Eventually, though, the agenda was extended to three days.

[21] Peter Salner, *Budúci rok v Bratislave alebo Stretnutie* [Next Year in Bratislava, or The Meeting] (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2007), pp. 144-145.

of the Holocaust"[22]). Older people are rare, younger ones even more so. Each of the members grew up in Czechoslovakia, experienced life under the Communist regime and ideology, and had to cope with the traumatic invasion of the country on August 21, 1968. Apart from shared memories, another thing that brings the members together is an active or passive experience with emigration.[23] These factors, combined with the policy that every new application can be approved or rejected by the members, create a certain sense of safety. This gives rise to the abovementioned homogeneity, which, it must be said, does not prevent differences of opinion in regard to the assessment of specific events.

The Website

The emergence and continued existence of the group were primarily made possible by its website, which serves an organizational but mainly communicative function. The extent and content of the correspondence shows that the members view the group and its activities as something profoundly enriching to their lives: *"The fact that this forum exists—that it's here, that we have someone to turn to in times of need—gives it purpose not only at present but also in the future, until the day the last of us leaves and turns off the light, and who knows, maybe even beyond that. The lived fates of the individual members—their memories, their growth, and experience—fill this forum with rich and unique content […] What by any other means would be very protracted, perhaps even impossible, can be taken care of within a few hours or days thanks to the forum"* (Silvia, Germany, July 16, 2008). This sentiment is not unique: *"I have met many old friends, made new acquaintances, and overall, my life has been significantly enriched"* (Vera, London, December 3, 2007). The value of the forum (and the in-person meetings) was aptly summarized by a member of the group from Toronto. His email (without a detailed characterization of the author) was published by Alena Heitlingerová:[24] *"It was as if the Lord had given us the chance to return to the days of our youth. It was incredible, meeting old friends after nearly 37 years. Almost two generations had passed, and still, we all felt as though it was only yesterday that we last saw each other. We came from Australia, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Austria, Belgium, Israel,*

[22] The term "children of the Holocaust," which denotes people born to Holocaust survivors, was coined by Helen Epstein. In the literature, it is often considered synonymous to the term "the second generation." See Helena Epsteinová, *Děti holocaustu* [Children of the Holocaust] (Prague: Volvox Globator, 1994).

[23] Several members of the group had invited the author and playwright Viliam Klimáček to Toronto. Based on their memories of the pros and cons of emigration, he wrote the book *Horúce leto 68* [The Hot Summer of '68], which was then adapted into a theatre play. The play was rehearsed by volunteer actors from the Czechoslovak community in Toronto and then performed in several Slovak cities.

[24] Alena Heitlingerová, *Ve stínu holocaustu a komunismu. Čeští a slovenští židé po roce 1945* [In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism. Czech and Slovak Jews Since 1945] (Prague: G+G, 2007), p. 118.

Canada, the USA, the UK, and the Netherlands. It was unbelievable and truly magical. Like a gift from God, the fact that we saw each other again, that we spoke, danced, ate, and laughed together after so many years."

The website provided a safe and open space allowing the members to share their views, joys, and concerns. This gave rise to discussions about various subjects, including the Jewish identity, faith, and the political situation in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Israel, and other countries. There was also plentiful debate regarding the concept of homeland, personal (family) experiences with Communist persecution in the members' childhood, the pros and cons of emigration, experiences of anti-Semitism, traditions, as well as the place of Christmas in Jewish families[25] and reflections of the Holocaust.[26] In 2008 the fortieth anniversary of the 1968 invasion brought back many factual and emotional memories.[27] The members also criticized membership in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and collaboration with the secret police. The archives of secret police informants, which were published when the Bratislava meeting was under preparation, also contained the names of some of the group's members. There were calls for their expulsion from the forum and demands to disinvite them from the event. Eventually, the argument that the emigrants were not familiar with the conditions in normalization-era Czechoslovakia, and therefore could not imagine how they would have acted in similar circumstances, prevailed. Nevertheless, the episode left a bitter aftertaste.

The members' varying relationships to Judaism represented another source of potential tension and difference in identity. While some of the members are religious, most have a lukewarm or even negative attitude toward faith. The organizers of the Bratislava meeting openly voiced concerns that involving the Bratislava Jewish Religious Community (JRC) could put certain people off attending the event. One member's offer to provide kosher food led to accusations that he was motivated by profit. This clearly demonstrates that the

[25] In some families Christmas was forbidden, whereas in others it was embraced: "For many secular Jews, celebrating Christmas was not a big issue because under the Communist regime, Christmas had basically become a secular, materialistic holiday. It was mainly about the tree, the decorations, the presents, the Christmas pastries, and the traditional supper of carp and potato salad, not about celebrating the birth of Christ." See Alena Heitlingerová, *Ve stínu holocaustu a komunismu. Čeští a slovenští židé po roce 1945* [In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism. Czech and Slovak Jews Since 1945] (Prague: G+G, 2007), pp. 75-76. See also 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), p. 75.

[26] For more, see Peter Salner, *Budúci rok v Bratislave alebo Stretnutie* [Next Year in Bratislava, or The Meeting] (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2007). See also Peter Salner, *Minulý rok v Jeruzaleme* [Last Year in Jerusalem] (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2010).

[27] In 2008, during the anniversary of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, remembrance events were held in Bratislava, Toronto, and some cities in Israel and Germany, brought together under the slogan "The Day that Changed Our Lives".

organizers' caution was well-founded, and that the Jewish identity is not exclusively tied to Judaism (or possibly its Orthodox form).[28] For most people, its ethnic, cultural, and historical dimensions are key. In the end, the greater part of the event was held on the JRC premises. Kosher food was served. Divine worship on Friday evening and Saturday morning drew believers as well as non-believers, who attended out of curiosity, solidarity, or because of the nostalgic memory of their parents who once used to frequent the synagogue. However, most of the participants preferred to meet with friends and relatives, sit in cafés, go shopping or strolling around town, etc.

The differences of opinion confirmed that the members of the group did not view the past through rose-tinted glasses. That being said, fond memories of their childhood did prevail, having to do, for instance, with local delicacies unavailable abroad, such as poppyseed cakes, cremeschnittes, punch cakes, chestnut purée, *halušky*, homemade sausages, cod salad, and so on. The "exchange" of sayings and proverbs that the members remembered from their youth, as well as their memories of old famous songs and movies, added a light, entertaining touch.

As regards the functioning of the group, the work of the moderator was especially important. Every day, Emil from Germany combed through, selected, and shared a number of articles from print and audiovisual media in the Slovak, Czech, German, and English languages. Most dealt with Jewish affairs, with an emphasis on important personalities and current political and cultural events. Emil initiated discussions on various subjects, paying increased attention to the Holocaust and its present reflections. He followed manifestations of anti-Semitism and regularly commented on political and cultural developments in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Israel. For people who, by that time, had spent the majority of their lives abroad, he was a guide to the Czech and Slovak reality. They viewed the results of Emil's activities as more than just a pleasant pastime. Many of them did not know about the current problems of life in their early homeland, and especially in the beginning, they had difficulties with the Slovak language and grammar: *"After 37 years, we can be glad that we can even speak Slovak to each other. The carons, commas, and accents really aren't that important"* (Viktor, Australia, July 24, 2005). After some time of the website's existence, the members' awareness of current developments in their country of birth, as well as their vocabulary and grammar, visibly improved.

[28]At the meeting, there were also disagreements about the foreign and especially the domestic policy of the State of Israel.

The Holocaust after the Holocaust

Although the core of the group is made up of people born after the Liberation (between 1945 and 1955), almost every one of them was affected by the physical and/or mental anguish their parents had endured during the Holocaust. Through their parents' recounting of, or silence about,[29] their traumas, which they frequently passed on to their offspring, many of the group's members first encountered the recent tragedy in their childhood: *"It is true that we, the second generation, still carry with us our parents' experiences from the Second World War. Some of our friends were told about the horrors that had taken place; others were never given any information about them. Their parents were incapable of passing it on, even though they lived with the trauma till the end of their lives"* (Magda, Israel, January 20, 2009). Perhaps an even better example demonstrating that the children of the Holocaust are marked by the reverberations of their parents' suffering is represented by the following email: *"It's been two years since my mother died. She never told me about her past, and I never asked. It was enough that, every night since I was little, I could hear her scream and cry in her sleep. Once, when I was a boy, I asked her what she dreamed about. She said she dreamed about her memories of Auschwitz. I didn't understand, but I could tell that it was something horrible. I never asked again"* (Boris, Bratislava, January 20, 2009).

Other emails reflect, in hindsight, on the state of Communist society and the specific problems faced by members of the Jewish community, as well as on the fact that the regime exploited children in its search for "enemies of the state:" *"Where's that picture of the synagogue on Pushkin Street? I used to go to school there, to the neighboring building. The synagogue and the school shared a yard. In second grade* (in 1954 – P. S.)*, one of my teachers asked me to write down a list of people who attended the temple during holidays – because I knew them"* (Vera, London, January 2, 2006).

Another memory describes the existence and overcoming of childhood prejudices: *"We lived near the (Bratislava) Castle, and everyone knew we were Jewish. In first and second grade, none of my classmates would come visit because they knew that Jews baked children's blood into matzo. Then one girl mustered the courage and come to our place. She asked how come we had such a beautiful, clean apartment – Jews were supposed to be filthy.*

[29] For more on this, see Peter Salner, "Mlčať? Hovoriť? Formy medzigeneračného odovzdávania skúseností o holokauste v židovských rodinách" [To Speak? To Remain Silent? Forms of Intergenerational Transmission of Experience with the Holocaust in Jewish Families]. In: Monika Vrzgulová – Ľuba Voľanská – Peter Salner, *Rozprávanie a mlčanie. Medzigeneračná komunikácia v rodine* [Speaking and Silence. Intergenerational Communication in the Family] (Bratislava: Veda, 2017), pp. 86-109.

This was the turning point, and after that, boys and girls would come play in our courtyard. From then on, I was popular at school. They even [came to see me] on Easter, which, as a Jew, I was decidedly uncomfortable with" (Noemi, USA, March 26, 2010).

The members' memories frequently featured the phenomenon of "living with a mask", which can be considered a common self-defense mechanism in non-democratic societies. It is characterized by the effort to suppress one's political and cultural convictions and national or religious background to avoid endangering oneself and one's family. This often entailed keeping politically sensitive views secret from one's children or repeatedly instructing them as to what should and should not be said out loud in the presence of strangers. This reality (and the fear of its return) constituted one of the main motivations for the emigrants' departure.

Emigration

It should not be surprising that the members' discussions often revolved around the generationally conditioned differences of opinion regarding emigration. One email describes the dilemma of the parents, whose actions and decisions were informed by their experience of the Holocaust, as well as by the burden of being older and therefore responsible for their families: *"We should remember our parents. How many of them joined the Party out of gratitude that they had been liberated by the Soviet army? Later, they were trying to survive, making compromises every day just so they wouldn't go mad over the developments following February '48. They were all too aware that their friends were being disappeared, but they had no choice. Then, when '68 rolled around, many of them drew a line in the sand, and many others didn't, because although they no longer believed in the ideals, they thought it easier to adapt rather than to go off starting a new life abroad in their fifties and sixties"* (Peter, Bratislava, February 7, 2008).

The following email is also telling: *"Do I love the country? I just happened to be born in Czechoslovakia. In the '50s, when the purges were taking place, we got lucky. My father was 'only' fired from work and our family was driven out of our apartment. When my sister Minočka didn't come back in 1968, she was tried in absentia and convicted of treason. We didn't see each other for many years. I was only allowed to study part-time while working, and later, the secret police took my passport away. I stayed in the country—I had no choice—adapted, and forged friendships that last to this day. But as for love, I only love my family. I like my friends, and I admire decent people"* (Eva, Germany, November 1, 2007).

The show trials of the 1950s,[30] as well as other persecutions of the Communist regime, mostly had an impact on the survivors' generation. Their children were young, and thus they often viewed the negative aspects of the era as rather marginal.[31] For their generation, the fateful turning point came with the invasion of August 21, 1968, which violently halted the liberalization of Czechoslovak society. Emigration once again became the topic of the day. The potential dilemmas of the young were often resolved by their parents. Some were supportive of their children fleeing (even though they themselves frequently stayed, for a variety of reasons): *"My parents regretted not having left after the war for the rest of their lives. So they encouraged me to get out of the country. They didn't want us to 'miss that train'"* (Vera, London, August 12, 2008). However, there were also many parents who, for one reason or another, wished for their children to stay in Czechoslovakia: *"In '68, the question of coming back to Czechoslovakia posed a dilemma between freedom on one hand and family, more specifically parents, on the other. Should we abandon them and resist their plea to 'COME BACK'? Many were fortunate in that their parents encouraged them to stay, and they stayed. Others returned, as well-behaved children were expected to do"* (Peter, Bratislava, August 28, 2018). This attitude mostly had to do with the parents' age, poor health, optimistic outlook regarding future political developments, and fear that the young, without the support of their families, would not cope with the demands of a life in exile.

In the new environment, the emigrants mostly devoted themselves to addressing existential concerns: finishing their studies, finding a suitable job, starting a family. Especially in the beginning, they often felt nostalgic for the homeland, missing their friends and relatives who had stayed in Slovakia. Gradually, though, most of them adjusted. They feel at home in their adopted country, and their reflections on emigration, though it was not always voluntary or painless, are ultimately positive: *"We got lucky. I thank Fate that the Russians came"* (Vera, London, August 12, 2008). All that being said they remain tied to Czechoslovakia by an existential bond. The famed Czech actor Jan Werich, who returned from his American exile after the Second World War, gave a good explanation for this. The USA was simply not "where he had played marbles with the other kids."[32]

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[30] In the 1952 "trial of the anti-state conspiracy centered around Rudolf Slánský." Eleven of the 14 indicted officials were Jewish. Ten of them were sentenced to death. The prosecution repeatedly emphasized their "Jewish origin."

[31] This naturally does not apply to children whose parents were imprisoned or who were forced to move into worse apartments, often in the countryside. For more, see Žo Langerová, *Vtedy v Bratislave. Môj život s Oskarom L* [published in English as *Convictions: My Life with a Good Communist*] (Bratislava: Albert Marenčin Vydavateľstvo PT, 2007).

[32] Jiří Janoušek, *Rozhovory s Janem Werichem* [Conversations with Jan Werich] (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1982), p. 18.

The revolution of November 1989 caused a dramatic shift in the situation. Emigrants (not only Jews) could suddenly travel to Czechoslovakia without restriction, and they made use of this opportunity to come visit their friends and relatives. These meetings were often individual and did not permit group reunions with friends who were living in other countries on other continents. That is why the proposal for holding a collective event had such resonance.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the formation and early years of a group founded with the intention of holding a meeting of Jewish emigrants from Bratislava. To aid in this ambition, the organizers started a website that allowed interested parties from other cities in Slovakia, and later the Czech Republic, to join in.

Although the proclaimed goal was to hold "large meetings" and facilitate face-to-face contacts, the long-term existence of the group is mainly sustained by daily email correspondence. This has led to an increase in membership and facilitated the rekindling of old and making of new relationships. Most importantly, the website has become a platform where people can share their thoughts, reflect on their lives, and engage in discussions about the times. It provides a public and simultaneously anonymous space where the members can openly exchange views and opinions that otherwise remain private. The numerous, geographically, professionally, politically, and experientially diverse and (only seemingly paradoxically) homogenous group creates the conditions necessary for compelling, entertaining, and often emotionally taxing interactions.

The intensity of the email correspondence (between October 2004 and late April 2009, an average of ten emails were posted to the site every day) and the high attendance at each of the four big meetings (200-250 people) signal that the group has lasting importance for its members. This is aided by the fact that the main condition of membership, and the primary adhesive of the group, is the Jewish heritage of its members and the attendant legacy of the Holocaust, the experience of anti-Semitism, and also a certain historical, cultural, and, partially, religious awareness.

The correspondence on the website indicates different approaches to identity. Having Jewish origins is a condition (and an important motivation) for joining the group, but they themselves do not suffice to explain its continued existence. Jewishness typically represents

but one (and not always the most important) of many components of the members' identities. Practically in every country where the members live today, there are various Jewish religious, cultural, and sports organizations, but not everyone is interested in taking an active part in them. Despite that, Jewishness does constitute the foundation of the group: *"We all spent our childhood in Czechoslovakia. But what brings us together—what led to the creation of* The Meeting *and* Maisel's Children *groups—was not our Czechness or Slovakness, but our Jewishness. For those of us living away from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, there is little chance that our children will consider themselves Czech or Slovak, and nor do we expect them to. But all of us, or at least the majority of us, hope that our children will consider themselves Jewish, whether for religious reasons or because they have a sense of solidarity and a common frame of reference"* (Karel, Geneva, September 7, 2007).

The group's successful functioning is not hampered by the fact that it comprises Halakhic as well as non-Halakhic Jews, believers who observe the precepts and prohibitions of the faith as well as people who only view Judaism as having a "ceremonial" dimension or who entirely avoid expressions of religious faith. Although the website regularly features notifications of Jewish holidays and explanations of their importance, the (in)observance of the accompanying traditions is wholly individualized. Religious rituals (especially the Shabbath) do take place during the meetings, but participation is voluntary, and many people prefer to devote themselves to other activities. The fact that the group does not primarily follow religious precepts, nor the rules of a specific Jewish organization, gives the members the requisite sense of freedom: *"Thanks to this website, even I—an atheist who wasn't brought up in the Jewish faith, nor really in any Jewish traditions—began to feel like a respected member of this diverse community"* (Igor, Switzerland, January 1, 2008).

Based on the above, it is clear that, apart from the members' Jewish origins, the sense of solidarity is also strengthened by the "Czechoslovak footprint" (shared childhood memories, experience of the Communist regime, the use of the Slovak or Czech languages on the website and in interpersonal communication) and by the passive or active experience of emigration. This combination of factors has, since the beginning, helped to forge a bond of fellowship which, despite potential differences of opinion or personal animosities, characterizes the overall atmosphere of the group: *"Two fantastic reunions,*[33] *rekindled friendships, many small meetings on four continents, memorable arguments, jokes, thoughts, philosophies, congratulations on birthdays, weddings, and new grandchildren, and*

[33] Bratislava 2005 and Košice 2006.

condolences for the departed. For me, this has been a mending of a broken cycle, allowing me to reunite with old friends (and former lovers) and make new ones" (Yuri, Toronto, October 4, 2006). Several years later, the same member conveyed his feelings in an even more expressive fashion: *"Five years of rediscovery, four big meetings; I don't know if anyone has counted the small meetings, but I'd say there must've been hundreds. Five years since old friendships were reignited and new ones made. All the best to everyone, good health first and foremost. May we be happy and may we find joy in life. The togetherness that has emerged in this group is striking. We are a family, with everything that entails"* (Yuri, Toronto, September 23, 2009).

This may be the reason why the group has been so successful for so many years. It functions as a bridge between the past and the present, linking memories of home with the reality of emigration and bringing together people living in various countries on various continents: *"In the early autumn of our lives, we return to the spring of our youth"* (Silvia, Germany, September 2, 2006). The intense email correspondence allows the members to discuss subjects and present opinions that they are not always willing or able to engage with or express publicly.[34] Between 2010 and 2020, six more meetings were held, with each one drawing lots of people.

It is obvious that the group has provided its members with more than just the chance to take a nostalgic trip down memory lane. It has become a platform where people can share their thoughts, reflect on their lives, and engage in discussions about the times. It has provided a public and simultaneously anonymous space where the members can openly exchange views and opinions which, by virtue of their intimate character, otherwise tend to remain private. The numerous, geographically, professionally, politically, and experientially diverse and (only seemingly paradoxically) homogenous group creates the conditions necessary for mental relaxation as well as for compelling, entertaining, and often emotionally taxing interactions.

[34] *"I envy (in a good sense) our Israeli friends because they are in their own environment among their own people. To be able to wear a necklace with the Star of David and not have to look over one's shoulder and think about how it reflects on the neighbors must be nice, even in spite of all the other existential concerns. People are 'allowed to' openly communicate their faith, but it's not always easy, especially in Europe"* (Eva, Germany, October 20, 2008).

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