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Ambivalence, Dilemmas, and Aporias of Contemporary Czech Jewish *Lived Experience*

To Remember—and to Forget

To be a Jew almost always means to relate mentally to the Jewish past, whether the relation is one of pride or gloom or both together, whether it consists of shame or rebellion or pride or nostalgia (Amos Oz).[1]

As Tony Judt aptly captured, the post-WWII Eastern Europe had much more "to remember—and to forget"[2] than the West. The East was originally home to larger Jewish communities, most of the Jews were murdered on local soil, and the majority of societies were more involved in anti-Jewish violence during and after the war.[3] Respective governments have instrumentalized the crimes of WWII, including the Holocaust, for their nation-building narratives; however, Jews once again did not fit into the story.[4]

After the Holocaust, two thirds of European Jewry were decimated. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Nazi extermination was followed by persecution for more than four decades under the baton of totalitarian regimes. A "new layer of resentments and memories"[5] consisting of adversities and injustice constructed by the Communist régimes was painted over the raw unprocessed traumas of the Shoah and the WWII.[6]

Only after the end of the Cold War have Jewish communities found the strength to reclaim old or create new identities and minority cultures. At the end of the twentieth century, those who embarked on a complex journey of searching for Jewish roots were often immersed into the process of "becoming Jewish" accompanied by the so-called de-assimilation.

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1 Amos Oz, "Poem: To Be a Jew," Jewish Journal, January 2, 2019, https://jewishjournal.com/spiritual/poetry/291731/poem-to-be-a-jew/.

2 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 821.

3 Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, 821–822.

4 See: Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, 821–822.

5 Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, 823.

6 For the extensive study dedicated Jews in Czechoslovakia in 1945-1989, see Blanka Soukupová, Židé v Českých zemích po šoa. Identita poraněné paměti. [Jews in the Czech Lands after the Shoah. The Identity of Wounded Memory], Bratislava, Marenčin PT, 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110783216-009

In an attempt to find "authentic Jewishness" and one's place in it, diverse, sometimes intertwined paths were discovered and followed on a personal or communal level. Longing to belong took place through practicing passionate religiosity, dedication to the Holocaust commemoration, countering antisemitism and xenophobia, or attachment to Israel, among others.

One of the instruments to navigate Jewishness has been represented by efforts to revitalize the traditional Jewish culture and environment by breathing new life into it. "Jewish spaces" is a well-known term coined by Diana Pinto in the middle of the 1990s that has evolved over the last three decades and has been periodically revisited by researchers and intellectuals interested in European Jewish life.

"There is now a new cultural and social phenomenon: the creation of a 'Jewish space' inside each European nation with a significant history of Jewish life. The first is the gradual integration of the Holocaust into each country's understanding of its national history and into twentieth-century history in general. And the second is the revival of 'positive Judaism'" (Pinto 1996, 6).[7]

After 1989, during the first decade of post-communist transition, the so-called Jewish Renaissance occurred in Central and Eastern Europe. This phenomenon, described by Ruth Ellen Gruber[8] more than two decades ago, has involved both Jews and non-Jews and in many ways has still been evolving until today. Pinto's essay and Gruber's book heralded passionate polemics on "Jewish-less Jewish revival"[9] or how to distinguish between Jewish culture and Jewish-themed culture and whether it is still at all relevant.[10]

Prague's Jewish Community in Maiselova Street in the Old Town, once part of the Jewish Ghetto, was a prominent address for many who learned or intuited they had Jewish roots or were simply curious about quickly reborn Jewish life that suddenly emerged on the surface. In both cases, the Jewish community in the 1990s was somewhat unprepared to receive high numbers of "pilgrims." Many were sent away without even being able to enter the communal premises. Due to this selective approach, several Czech people with Jewish backgrounds were rejected

7 Diana Pinto, "A New Jewish Identity for Post-1989 Europe," *JPR Policy Paper 1* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 1996), accessed April 4, 2023, https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/a_ne/A%20New%20Jewish%20Identity%20For%20Post-1989%20Europe.pdf.

8 Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

9 Konstanty Gebert, "What is Jewish about Contemporary Central European Jewish Culture?" in *Being Jewish in 21st Century Central Europe*, ed. Haim Fireberg, Olaf Glöckner, and Marcela Menachem Zoufalá (De Gruyter, 2020), 283.

10 Gebert, "What is Jewish about Contemporary Central European Jewish Culture?" 283.

and never returned, remembering their often first and only encounter with a Jewish world as puzzling.

The factors that contributed to this exclusive attitude undoubtedly partly originated in twentieth century totalitarianism. Long-term persecution resulted in suspiciousness and mistrustfulness towards its surroundings.

Several conversation partners expressed an opinion that more or less has stayed the same regarding communal openness and permeability in the last three decades. However, many Jewish groups or organizations based on religious or cultural affiliation have been meanwhile established as partly or wholly inclusive and have welcomed those with partial or no Jewish roots. There is a religious reform movement, "Ec chajim," and the recently established Jewish Community Center (JCC), to name two such organizations, with all-encompassing world views. A number of Jewish "secular" organizations is listed under the umbrella of the Federation of Jewish Communities.[11]

Methodology

The study[12] introduces anthropological research that strives to deconstruct and interpret the meaning of Jewishness as a lived experience among the members of the Jewish minority in the Czech Republic today. The research topics include the self-perception and image of the world surrounding them; how Jews position themselves in their respective ambiance; do they experience a sense of belonging (sharing common destiny) on a national, transnational, global, (trans)local, or communal level; how they perceive the majority society's perspectives; and lastly, do they feel responsible for the well-being of their own community and (or) members of other minorities or even local/global majority society?[13] The research findings pre-

11 "Organization," Federation of Jewish Communities in Czech Republic, accessed May 12, 2023, https://www.fzo.cz/en/about-us/organization.

12 The article was supported by two research projects: 1) "United in Diversity"—An Interdisciplinary Study of Contemporary European Jewry and Its Reflection, which was awarded a multiyear grant under the Erasmus+ program, Key Action 2: Strategic Partnerships, by The Czech National Agency acting under the delegation of the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the EU. The project was carried out by Charles University as a coordinating institution, The Moses Mendelssohn Center for European Jewish Studies at the University of Potsdam, Comenius University and Tel Aviv University; 2) the program "Excellence Initiative – Research University" at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow ("Jewish and Muslim Minorities in Urban Spaces of the Central Europe," project ID WSMiP.2.3.2022).

13 An almost identical set of research topics was employed in the following OA article: Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, Joanna Dyduch, and Olaf Glöckner, "Jews and Muslims in Dubai, Berlin, and

sented in this article resulted from long-term qualitative anthropological research on Czech Jewish identity, sense of belonging, and transnationalism carried out in 2014–2022. The study's theoretical postulates employ a hermeneutic-narrative approach involving an emic perspective by highlighting the conversation partners' perception and interpretation of the reality surrounding them. The main methodological tools used to collect data were participant observation, interview, subsequent socio-cultural analysis, review of scholarly sources, literature, and press, occupied with the Jewish community's quality of life. Over 30 interviews were recorded, scrutinized, and interpreted.[14]

Participants

The fieldwork led to 31 in-depth interviews[15] with 11 Jewish women and 20 Jewish men. All conversation partners[16] were self-identified (self-ascribed) as Jews and Czechs, some of them Halachically Jewish, some of patrilineal descent, and one convert. All interview partners were eligible under the Israeli Law of Return. All the conversation partners have embraced their Jewishness openly within their social circles. Some of them have been employed or volunteered for Jewish organizations. All of them, except one, were born in Czechia or Slovakia (until 1993 Czechoslovakia). Most conversation partners lived in Prague; some lived in other major cities such as Brno, Karlovy Vary, and others. Czech was the primary conversation language, with occasional Hebrew, German or Yiddish vocabulary. Most of the interviews were carried out face-to-face and some were also online. The age of the interview partners spans between 24 and 71 years old.[17]

Warsaw: Interactions, Peacebuilding Initiatives, and Improbable Encounters," *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2021): 13, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010013.

14 See Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, "Ethno-religious Othering as a reason behind the Central European Jewish distancing from Israel," in *Being Jewish in 21st Century Central Europe*, ed. Haim Fireberg, Olaf Glöckner, and Marcela Menachem Zoufalá (De Gruyter, 2020). ISBN-13: 978–3110579659.

15 Additionally, dozens of concise verbal exchanges with so-called informants occurred for over a decade.

16 In line with the approach of the reflexive methodology, for the specific interviewees, the term "interview partners" or "conversation partners" rather than "respondents" was preferred to underline their essential share on the research.

17 According to different sources the number of the Czech Jews varies between 3,900 (Della Pergola, "World Jewish Population, 2020") to 20,000 (Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic). The majority of the Czech Jews lives in Prague. There are smaller communities in Brno, Plzeň, Karlovy Vary, Olomouc, Liberec, Děčín, Ostrava, Ústí nad Labem, and Teplice (ibid.).

Antisemitism as a Constant Phenomenon

While investigating the quality of life in the European Jewish context, the question that cannot be omitted is to what extent members of Jewish communities feel safe. What is their perception of antisemitism and do they have a personal experience?

Many Jewish conversation partners repeatedly claim that levels of antisemitism in the Czech Republic are shallow. This is often confirmed by the research on manifestations of antisemitism, showing that the Czech Republic is not only in the European context[18] but also worldwide a place with a relatively small number of antisemitic incidents.[19] The Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC) has repeatedly claimed that the Czech Republic is a "safe country for the Jewish community, especially compared to other countries of central and western Europe."[20] It is indisputable that physical antisemitic attacks are primarily carried out against visibly-identifiable Jews.[21] For this reason, many European (and global) Jewish

18 A recent study focused on antisemitic prejudices in Visegrad countries shown in cross-country comparisons displaying the relatively low proportion of strongly antisemitic respondents in the Czech Republic (two percent). In the three remaining Visegrád countries, the rate varied between 10 and 14 percent. This applied to so-called cognitive antisemitism (traditional religion-based anti-Judaism and Conspiratorial antisemitism). In the case of strong Secondary antisemitism that includes Holocaust denial and distortion, it was again Czechia with two percent, Poland and Slovakia with seven percent, while the highest rate, at 12 percent, was found in Hungary. On the other hand, Israel-focused antisemitism/new antisemitism in its moderate or strong extent was found among 52 percent of respondents in the Czech Republic, higher than Hungary with 49 percent but lower than Poland with 71 percent and Slovakia with 58 percent. Ildikó Barna and Tamás Kohut, rep., *Survey on Antisemitic Prejudice in the Visegrád Countries* (Budapest: Tom Lantos Institute, 2022).

19 For example, in 2021, the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic (FJC) recorded 1,128 antisemitic incidents. In line with trends of recent years, a constant increase can be observed; the current number of incidents is 254 higher than in 2020, when 874 incidents were recorded. Ninety-eight percent of all incidents belongs to cyberantisemitism (findings from Annual report on manifestations of antisemitism in the Czech Republic 2021, published by the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic).

FJC findings can be compared to the Police Presidium of the Czech Republic data: "In 2022, there were 25 criminal offenses against Jews. (…) There was a single criminal case involving threats to an individual or group of people with death or bodily harm; (…) there were no incidents of disorderly conduct against Jews involving desecration or attacking another. (…) Two defamation incidents and four instigating hatred incidents were recorded in 2022." "Antisemitism Worldwide Report for 2022," Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry – Tel Aviv University. It is important to clarify that the data from the Police Presidium are significantly lower due to solely registering antisemitic "criminal offenses" and not "incidents."

20 Annual Report on Manifestations of Antisemitism in the Czech Republic 2021, 8.

21 Annual Report on Manifestations of Antisemitism in the Czech Republic 2021, 5.

leaders appeal to their local community members to be inconspicuous and not appear as easy targets with kippa or Magen David on the streets.

However, even though the Czech Republic is often considered a safe haven by the international Jewish community, most of the conversation partners of this study have encountered antisemitic prejudices, both positive and negative stereotypes, similarly as being subjected to fetishization and exoticization, while interacting with the majority of society.

When asked about the outdoor wearing of Jewish symbols, such as kippa or Magen David, most of the conversation partners generally agreed it was not a problem; however, most of them eventually preferred not to identify with their beliefs publicly. The declared reasons varied from avoiding to showing off and considering these matters of a private nature. A few mentioned safety concerns or simply feeling uncomfortable. Those wearing the symbols occasionally expressed their need to appear in good taste without being too striking.

"Do You Have a Mezuzah on Your Door? Yeah, I do. On the Outside? No..."

Having mezuzah affixed to the doorposts is a certain indicator for diaspora Jews. This is not a matter of one's personal taste or body image, as mentioned earlier, but rather something permanently posted on the entry door distinguishing the space as a Jewish household, as a traditional sign that cannot be as easily undone as removing a kippa or taking down a Magen David. Having a mezuzah on the main door was an important question for many of our conversation partners. However, only one home carried it – an apartment in the building with a constantly locked street gate. The given explanation for having a mezuzah inside but not outside of the house included theft of the mezuzah by curious passers seeking an original souvenir. The predominant motive for having it inside was often a certain discomfort:

> "Did you have a mezuzah on the door?"
> "At home? No, I didn't. I had it on the other, inside door."
> "And why on the inside door?"
> "Because I didn't want to draw attention to it. Then again, I didn't really know the neighbors."

Local Unique Entanglement: Secularization, Assimilation, and Intermarriage

One of the justifications for not exposing their ethnoreligious identity externally might be the overall features of the surrounding environment. The Czech Republic is recognized as the most atheistic country in Central and Eastern Europe[22] while other countries' comfortable majorities are religiously affiliated and believe in God.[23] Czechs also do not relate Christianity with their national identity, comparable to most Western Europeans.[24] One of the local features is that a fervent religiousness manifested outwardly is relatively uncommon. Certain inconspicuousness intrinsic to the majority society is even more intense among minorities. This might be an apparent response to the twentieth-century multiple traumas mentioned above.

Another particularity of the local environment is a high rate of Czech-Jewish intermarriages in the first third of the twentieth century. For example, in the years 1928–1933 almost one fifth of marriages of Jewish people were intermarriages. In the Bohemian part of the Czechoslovakia the number was more than twice higher (43.8 percent) and in Moravia nearly every third marriage was with someone from outside of the community.[25, 26]

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22 "About seven-in-ten Czechs (72%) do not identify with a religious group, including 46% who describe their religion as "nothing in particular" and an additional 25% who say "atheist" describes their religious identity. When it comes to religious belief – as opposed to religious identity – 66% of Czechs say they do not believe in God, compared with just 29% who do." Jonathan Evans, "Unlike Their Central and Eastern European Neighbors, Most Czechs Don't Believe in God," Pew Research Center, July 22, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/19/unlike-their-central-and-eastern-european-neighbors-most-czechs-dont-believe-in-god/.

23 "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, May 10, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/.

24 "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, October 29, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/.

25 "In Bohemia the figure was 43.8 percent, in Moravia 30 percent, in Slovakia 9.2 percent, and in Subcarpathian Rus' 1.3 percent," Petr Brod, Kateřina Čapková, and Michal Frankl, "Czechoslovakia," YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe (2010), accessed April 11, 2023, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Czechoslovakia.

26 For the history of the Jews in the Bohemian Lands written by an international team of scholars, see Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval, *Prague and beyond Jews in the Bohemian Lands* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

These figures are globally unparalleled. According to DellaPergolla, most of the Jews worldwide in the 1930s (65 percent) lived in countries with less than five percent of intermarriages and a quarter of them did not even reach one percent. The worldwide average was 5.1 percent in 1930 and 33.5 percent in 1980. In the U.S. in 2001, every second marriage was an intermarriage (54 percent).[27]

These above-mentioned patterns were also noticed by one of the first Holocaust historians in Bohemia and Moravia, Miroslav Kárný, who testified that the local Jewish experience could be characterized by a high degree of secularization, assimilation, and intermarriage.[28]

Several generations of solid assimilation and a high intermarriage rate sometimes resulted in antisemitism within the mixed families. As one conversation partner summed up: "(...) that awkward moment when my [non-Jewish] dad says to my [Jewish] mom something like 'you're all Kohn!' But not that anyone would be mad at me." Even though the stigmatized partner is predominantly the minority, there are cases where the non-Jewish family member is silently perceived as lacking a particular understanding and is not seen as "one of the tribe."

During the communist era in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, minorities were regularly discouraged from performing their cultures and traditional customs. The population was homogenized, and manifestations of distinction were often punished. Minorities themselves were considered a threat to the collectively imposed identities of Czechoslovak socialist citizens. This authoritarian approach naturally qualified minorities for activities in dissent, and at the same time they were perceived as more vulnerable to the investigative and recruiting practices of the secret police. In other words, being openly Jewish during the totality could be seen as a sign of resistance against the régime.

"Are you wearing a Magen David around your neck?"

"I only wore it under the communists. It was a symbol of resistance to the regime. Now I'd consider it an exhibition. I don't see any reason to list it anywhere. After all, it's listed on my Wikipedia page."

Many conversation partners referred to the persecution of minorities and state-sponsored antisemitism during the Communist era. One of its peaks was undoubtedly Operation Spider carried out during the 1970s and 1980s, the so-called Normalization that followed the 1968 Prague Spring terminated by the Soviet (Varsovian pact) Invasion. As researchers agreed, an increased persecution of Czecho-

27 Sergio DellaPergola, *Jewish Intermarriage around the World* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 26–27.
28 Miroslav Kárný, *"Konečné Řešení": Genocida Českých Židů v Německé Protektorátní Politice* (Praha: Academia, 1991), 18.

slovak citizens of Jewish origin by the security apparatus of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic can be observed during this period.[29]

In 1972, the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior initiated a "targeted mapping and registration of persons of Jewish origin (religion),"[30] their family members, and persons who had come into contact with the Jewish culture and religion in any way. Jewish organizations were also under increased control of the security apparatus.[31]

Most of the volumes were destroyed by the State Security in December 1989; however, researchers estimate that between 1972 and 1989, approximately 20,000 people were included in the Operation Spider records.[32]

How Garlic Helps Jews to Rule the World

A few conversation partners shared their direct experiences with classical antisemitic prejudices, such as "Jews have abnormal body parts," "Jews like garlic," etc.

One conversation partner recalls how she was ordering a vegetarian dinner for a trip with the Czech Union of Jewish Youth. Once the restaurant learned the meal was for a Jewish group, in an attempt to meet all customers' desires, they asked if they wanted to add a lot of garlic. "So I agreed with a certain amount of garlic to make them happy," the partner concludes with a slightly tired smile. Furthermore, she shares her long-life feeling of responsibility that she believes might be common for other small-sized Jewish communities: "For a lot of my non-Jewish friends, I'm the only Jewish person. And if I acted like a bitch, they'd take it out on everybody. That's why even with strangers, I feel the need to be on my guard and behave myself. When I go on a trip organized by a Jewish

29 Martin Šmok, *Through the Labyrinth of Normalization: The Jewish Community as a Mirror for the Majority Society* (Prague: Jewish Museum, 2017).

30 Michael Nosek, "Akce PAVOUK," Policie České republiky, October 6, 2022, https://www.policie.cz/clanek/akce-pavouk.aspx.

31 The registration of the Jewish population was already carried out by State Security in the 1950s when Operation "Family" was conducted. In 1962, the operation was discontinued on the grounds of "manifestation of antisemitism in counter-intelligence work." Nosek, "Akce PAVOUK." In the 1950s, the infamous antisemitic show trial against 14 members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, "Trial of the Leadership of the Anti-State Conspiracy Centre Headed by Rudolf Slánský," also took place.

32 Ondřej Koutek, "Akce 'PAVOUK': Evidování židovského obyvatelstva Státní bezpečností za normalizace [Operation "Spider": the registration of the Jewish population by the State Security during the Normalization]," *Paměť a dějiny* (2017/01): 54.

organization, we're so careful to bear; it's almost unnatural, lest they say, jeez, those Jews are assholes."

Several partners experienced even raw conspiracy theories that could be reduced to claims that "Jews are wealthy, and that's why they are ruling the world" (or the other way around). Quite a number of the partners testified that conspiracy theories were to be found at the intellectual margins of society and also among highly educated people. Karol Efraim Sidon, the Chief Rabbi of the Czech Republic and former Chief Rabbi of the city of Prague, revealed an absurd encounter where he had such an experience. In an almost humorous manner, Sidon recounted that shortly after he returned from emigration and became a rabbi, he was approached by the board of directors of the Czechoslovak Commercial Bank seeking his support against the then finance minister. "We were pretty taken aback – they really expected us to be able to help them in real terms! We didn't even pray for them. Yet it was about the only thing we could do. The idea of a Jewish conspiracy and the power that Jews have is inflated everywhere in the world," he concluded.

"They are all Anti-Israel"

One younger conversation partner shared her disenchantment and sense of exclusion from her liberal left-wing social circles shaped by inherent anti-Israeli rhetoric that she perceived as not grounded in critical thinking and sadly unfair. "They are all anti-Israel, I mean really anti-Israel. On the other hand... not anti-Jewish, but anti-Israel. It's kind of weird, you know."

She spends a lot of time in the company of young leftist activists and intellectuals, who write articles on social issues that she considers brilliant and organize demonstrations that she loves to attend.

She is convinced that one should always be critical, considering the Czech Republic, any other country, "and even Israel." Further, the conversation partner expressed her disappointment that specific Israel-related issues are undebatable with her peers. "It bothers me terribly when you can't carry on a debate with someone, and it happens to me quite often, just with activist leftists, that they use words like genocide... and it just... it's not like... it's not... So yeah, we can talk about what's wrong, absolutely, but they can't just knock any debate off the table with something like that right away; it's like not true (...), and you can't argue against it..."

Perception of Majority Views

Our conversation partners, when asked about their experiences with the majority of society's attitudes towards the Czech Jews, presented the following points: many claimed that Czech people simply don't care and they might have never met a Jew, and even if they have, they may not recognize them. "Zero opinion" or "most people don't care" were some of the typical responses. At the same time, they mention deeply-rooted positive perceptions of Jews due to famous Jewish actors, writers, and artists that are considered as "ours" by the Czech mainstream society. Furthermore, after the Velvet Revolution, many non-Jewish writers, intellectuals, diplomats, and politicians willingly helped to create an embracing milieu for Jews in the Czech Republic. This strongly inclusive attitude of the Czech elites might have sprang from a "shared sense of persecution"[33] experienced together with the Jewish minority during the totalitarian era. The elites' approach is also due the moral legacy of the first Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk whose active engagement against blood libel's accusation in an antisemitic cause called later Hilsner Affair positively influenced the status of the Jewish minority and subsequently also Czech-Israeli relations. Masaryk was followed in this respect by the first democratically elected president after 1989, Václav Havel.[34]

Another factor potentially contributing to rather favorable or at least neutral stances towards Jewish minority and Israel was bluntly framed by one interview partner in the following words: "(…) as the anti-communism is going on now, it is also connected with that; if we say we are anti-communists, we cannot do what the communists did – to be like anti-Jews and anti-Israel."

The described process could be naturally detected in many post-totalitarian political decisions and the general shaping of the political culture. The guiding principle was negative delimitation against the former regime.

One of the emerging topics of majority-minority relations was the relatively low visibility of the Czech Jews, which several partners assessed as somehow natural: "I don't think they're [Czech majority] even really addressing it. Because Jews are not particularly visible in society, they don't think about them at all."

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33 "Israel Studies in Poland, Czech Republic, and Germany: paths of development, dynamics, and directions of changes," Journal of Israeli History, Joanna Dyduch, Marcela Menachem Zoufalá & Olaf Glöckner (2023) https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13531042.2023.2212891

34 Dyduch, Glöckner, and Menachem Zoufalá, "Israel Studies in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany: Paths of Development, Dynamics, and Directions of Changes."

“Let People Know we Live Here and are Totally Normal!”

“And I just have the feeling that they [the Czech public] don’t see us at all, and this is why it’s necessary to do these events to let people know that we [Jews] live here and that we’re completely normal. That’s the basic principle of fighting against people being afraid of you and thinking, who knows what.” The partner then describes how members of the Union of Jewish Youth attend together Prague Pride or pro-refugee demonstrations with giant banners including stars of David. “I would like to see [Jewish] people more in the public space…” she suggests.

“Let the Muslim Woman be Here, But Don’t Wear the Hijab, let the Jew be Here, but Let Him Eat Pork”

One conversation partner, while asked about the future of Jews in Europe, contemplated that he would like to see an inclusive future rather than “to flee to an independent state and ghettoize ourselves.” He shared his concerns that Europe is heading towards “going armored,” and he would like to have it more “connected and intertwined.” He followed this up with a description of the situation of Jews and other minorities in the Czech Republic, where according to his observation Jews can live their Jewishness safely and comfortably but only at home. “If I’m openly expressing my origins and my beliefs, that’s where things can get messy.” He continued with the following comparative examples: “Let the Muslim woman be here, but don’t wear the hijab, let the Jew be here, but let him eat pork. That’s very Czech, I think, let the gays be gays, but don’t hold hands outside.” By pointing out the limited tolerance or rather acceptance he perceives among the majority of society, he repeatedly emphasized that these attitudes do not represent a problem for himself as he is not religious.. He criticized it, however, on behalf of those who may “need to visibly claim that, need to live by the rules more than, say, I do, or are religious… it’s going to be hard for them.”

And elsewhere:

> Get in, believe what you want at home, but don’t drag it out. I won’t have a problem with it, but it can be difficult for someone whose Judaism is more intense.

Another conversation partner expressed his perceptions about the majority of society's views on Jews quite bluntly: "As long as the Jews are cute to cuddle, fine, but the moment they should be above them [the majority society], they go crazy. And I think it's been here battered by communism. When you look at those kids' movies, every school is always the same, right? There's this little boy running out with his satchel; his daddy's picking him up, and his mommy's cooking at home, right, and there's no Jew."

Other Minorities

A Tiny Step Away From Being a Muslim to Being a Jew

Even though we never directly asked conversation partners about their attitudes towards other minorities, many of them simultaneously opened those topics with antisemitism. They shared concerns mainly regarding Muslims in Europe and their well-being, pointing out general unacceptance by the majority of society. According to recent polls, 65 percent of the Czech population has a favorable view of Jews, while almost the same number, 64 percent, has an unfavorable opinion of Muslims, and 66 percent for Roma.[35] Negative perspectives predictably grow with higher age and lower education. The Muslim and Roma minorities are often perceived as stigmatized, and the level of negative prejudices from the majority society is generally extreme. Jews, on the contrary, are prevalently seen as a privileged minority with an elevated social status, stereotyped as well-educated, intelligent, and wealthy, serving as a positive reference group for a large part of Czech society. More than half of Czechs (51 percent) would accept Jews into their family while only 12 percent would accept Muslims.[36]

It is crucial to remind readers here that a large part of the anthropological fieldwork was carried out during and after the so-called refugee crisis where the EU widely criticized the Czech Republic for not accepting enough people escaping from the Middle East or North Africa.

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35 Richard Wike et al., "European Public Opinion Three Decades after the Fall of Communism," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, October 15, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/.

36 "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, October 29, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/.

The three statements below spontaneously compared the situation of Jews with predominantly Muslim refugees, with the conversation partners noticing clearly emerging patterns of group-focused enmity:

> (…) these sort of hatreds towards some other population groups purely arise from that frustration, and that when you've got *another population group* that's being targeted, there's no need to target the Jews.
>
> So the antisemitism is, I think, in those people just as much as the Islamophobia, that those people are just as capable of turning against the Jews as they are now against the Muslims.
>
> Today, under the influence of the refugee crisis, the sleeping demon suddenly awakens, and one doesn't quite realize; one sees that it's just a tiny step away from being a Muslim to being a Jew.

Compared to Western Europe, the actual demographic figures applying to Muslim minorities of Central and Eastern Europe are relatively low[37] – similar to Jewish ones (except for Hungary, Austria, and Germany). There are ca. 20,000 Muslims[38] in the Czech Republic, with an estimated few hundred Czech Muslim converts.[39] However, the role of the Other in the imagination of the majority seems quite crucial without considering whether the minorities' presence is tangible or just imagined. Members of minorities, representing the Others, are often interchangeable[40] in the eyes of the majority, and the objective consequences of that are, on many levels, self-evident. One of the relatively recent examples par excellence from the Central European neighborhood can serve local demonstration against accepting Muslim refugees, which escalated into the burning of an effigy of an ultra-Orthodox Jew holding the flag of the EU.[41]

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37 Statista Research Department, "Estimated Muslim Populations in European Countries as of 2016," Statista, February 28, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/868409/muslim-populations-in-european-countries/.

38 "Europe's Growing Muslim Population," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, November 29, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/.

39 For a demographic overview and original findings on Muslim-Jewish relations in the Czech Republic, see Zbyněk Tarant, "Jews and Muslims in the Czech Republic – Demography, Communal Institutions, Mutual Relations."

40 See e. g. Jiří Smlsal, "Kontinuita Stereotypů. Židé, Romové, Muslimové," Migrace Online, May 17, 2016, https://migraceonline.cz/cz/e-knihovna/kontinuita-stereotypu-zide-romove-muslimove.

41 "Protesters Burn Effigy of Orthodox Jew at Anti-Immigration Protest in Poland," i24NEWS, November 20, 2015, https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/europe/93019-151120-protesters-burn-effigy-of-orthodox-jew-at-anti-immigration-protest-in-poland.

Ambiguity Towards Muslims

In some Czech Jews' testimonies, Muslims were perceived not only as another even more vulnerable European minority but also, simultaneously, as potential perpetrators of antisemitism. A few conversation partners expressed this ambivalence, showing sympathy or even responsibility for Muslims' safety and well-being on the one hand, while palpable undercurrents revealed a sense of jeopardy or even dire predictions about the European Jewish future on the other.

One of the conversation partners introduced his views, saying that since the establishment of Israel the diaspora had partly lost its justification. With a seemingly stoic attitude, he let himself be heard that "(...) with the increase in the Muslim population of Europe, antisemitism will rise in those traditional countries and end up with Jews leaving or ceasing to be Jews."

Another voice expressing duality in the perception compared the two minorities through the majority lens, attributing the role of a more suitable scapegoat to the Muslims: "(...) the hatred or the need to find an enemy leans now in a different direction, you don't recognize the Jew that easily, and there are so few of them; I'm not saying there are more Muslims, but it's easier [to delimit themselves] against the perceived or real danger." Here, the particular antagonistic perception of Muslims as potential victims and "perceived or real danger" materializes in one sentence.

Some of the younger interview partners, however, expressed unequivocal solidarity or even a sense of guilt for having another minority to "shield" them:

> (...) But now it will take some time before we become the center of attention, like the Muslims are today. That, unfortunately, or fortunately, is how it is. I'm worried about it, as part of a minority, I feel responsible for how other minorities are doing, and whose situation is not ideal.
>
> *Do you yourself wear any symbols out on the street?*
>
> I do, and I don't care. When we attend demonstrations, we have badges that say SuperJew, and so on.
>
> *So you have no problem walking through Prague wearing a SuperJew badge?*
>
> Maybe in time I will have a problem, because people say I look like an Arab (laughter), so in time I'll have a problem taking a walk with my looks. And then maybe that Jewish star will, on the contrary, save me.

The surge of the xenophobia and Islamophobia that has accompanied the so-called refugee crises allowed the Czech Jews to identify with Muslims and emphasized their minority consciousness. In some cases, it amplified the gap between them

and the majority of society and strengthened their Jewish affiliation: "I have a terrible problem with how people treat issues of race and ethnicity. It's so important to me that it's how I differentiate between people I want to talk to and people I don't want to talk to. And that's the one crucial marker that I feel more people in the [Jewish] community see the same way I do."

Ingathering of the Exiles

The relationship of Czech Jews to Israel is often immersed in intense nostalgia and protectiveness blended with a certain ambivalence potentially rooted in a growing difficulty of self-identification with a distant and rapidly changing Middle Eastern country.[42] Another significant perspective common for Jews globally was the perception of Israel through safety lenses. Israel represents an ultimate refuge "if things would go wrong." This generally pragmatic aspect of the diaspora attitude transmuted in the following account into the partially unconscious search for belonging and authenticity that, surprisingly, for the author of the statement, was found in Israel:

> Many years ago, I was in Israel at a youth meeting, and a large proportion of the people did not arrive because the Iraq war had just started, so the first thing I got in Israel was a gas mask. A lot of people simply didn't arrive because their parents would not let them go there. I spent 14 days in Israel with European Jews, and it was a very happy time, which for me was very interesting because they were interesting people, we had interesting lectures, and moreover, it was in Israel, and I had room and board. But I realized that for me, absolutely the most important thing was that it was as if I somehow seemed to lose vigilance. Although I was in a country where Scuds with nerve gas could start falling at any time, I felt very safe there. I, who just walks around, and for 43 years now, have been saying that there is no antisemitism in the Czech, had to admit to myself that even though there are a lot of things to be afraid of in Israel, at the same time, there are things one doesn't need to worry about because everyone is Jewish. Some are not Jews, of course, but it is a Jewish majority society, and the people share the idea that we are all in the same boat.

It may appear seemingly paradoxical that this specific conversation partner represents a diasporic Jewish intellectual par excellence for his surroundings, even to a certain extent distancing himself from Israeli society. In parallel, he has retroactively harmonized an essential part of his life story with the biblical promise of

42 See Menachem Zoufalá, "Ethno-religious Othering as a reason behind the Central European Jewish distancing from Israel."

the Ingathering of the Exiles,[43] one of the principal foundations of Zionist narratives contributing to the concept of the negation of the diaspora.

Discussion

The quality of life of the Czech Jewish diaspora can be described as one the highest in Europe, if not worldwide, after the Velvet Revolution. According to statistics, antisemitism is generally on relatively low levels in the long run, with anti-Jewish violence in particular almost nonexistent. Czech Jews are mostly rushing to confirm this; however, it is also necessary to determine their comparative framework and point of departure. The Central European distinct settings that emerged from twentieth-century disastrous ideologies may play a role in these favorable assessments that are being issued no matter how complex the real circumstances might be. Most of the interview partners, while asked specifically about their personal day-by-day experience with antisemitism, eventually provided several examples. Nevertheless, they often perceived these cases as irrelevant, worthless to mention, or even an inherent part of the Jewish experience.

Several conversation partners mentioned that the relatively flat level of antisemitism might also result from the lower visibility of Jews in the public space. This applies to previously discussed wearing of religious symbols, such as kippa or Magen David, and the Jewish voice in public debate. There might be many different factors contributing to this status quo.

Besides the aftermath of the already discussed twentieth-century traumas, and the limited size of the local Jewish community that receives naturally less attention, it can also be kept in mind that the Czech environment does not commonly create optimum conditions for strong nationalism and fervent religiosity – that applies to both majority and minority population.

Czech Jews were one of the most assimilated diaspora communities in the first half of the twentieth century. The number of intermarriages before WWII was globally unique, with more than four out of ten Jewish people married to someone outside of the community. Considering these figures, Czech society back then seems convincingly liberal and open. Nevertheless, recently extensive research revisiting the image of "Masaryk's Czechoslovakia" as the democratic island, the only

43 Deuteronomy 30: 1–5.

liberal state in Central Europe equalizing minorities, has challenged this long-standing perception.[44]

One of the crucial points of this research is represented by a number of interview partners being preoccupied with other minorities' well-being, as expressed in their accounts. It can even be claimed there is a widely shared discomfort among the Czech Jews originating in concerns of growing xenophobia, Islamophobia, and Antigypsyism targeting Muslims, Roma, and recently Ukrainian refugees. Islamophobia has been rising as a repercussion of the so-called refugee crisis since 2015. Antigypsyism is a constant phenomenon in the Czech Republic, widely accepted even in educated circles and repeatedly criticized by the EU. The considerations extended to other minorities spontaneously emerged among the conversation partners, mainly while answering questions about antisemitism. This outcome reconfirmed the unchallenged position of Jews as a certain indicator, metaphorically known as a canary in the coal mine regarding the overall atmosphere in the society.

The xenophobia targeting other minorities has made Czech Jews reconsider their own status and, in some cases, feel more vulnerable and strengthen their ties to the Jewish community, where they felt more understood and that it was appropriate to share their concerns.

Perception of Muslims oscillates between identification with another minority group currently in the "center of attention" to apprehending them as potential carriers of antisemitism. In some cases, Jewish interview partners felt guilty for helplessly witnessing as other minorities, not exclusively the Muslims, were "taking a bullet" (instead of them) by channeling the majority of society's xenophobic attitudes.

Stanisław Krajewski, a Polish Jewish intellectual and one of the contributors to the earlier featured debate on Jewish revival in Central Europe, shared a provocative perspective on the de-assimilation of Jews after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, claiming it was, partially, the non-Jewish interest in the "Things Jewish" that encouraged Jews with troubled, conflicted identities to rediscover their roots and heritage.

"If there is a general interest, then the whole atmosphere becomes different, and [Jewish] people are much more ready to overcome their fear and feeling of

44 Tatjana Lichtenstein, *Zionists in Interwar Czechoslovakia: Minority Nationalism and the Politics of Belonging* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

being inadequate (…) when they try to explore or get closer to the Jewish culture and traditions,"[45] he noted.

Analyzing this observation through the prism of post-colonial cultural studies, a certain inverse parallel with Said's renowned concepts formulated in Orientalism[46] can be drawn. "The Other," here represented by Jews, learned about themselves through the eyes of the hegemonic society, this time in an overwhelmingly positive manner clearly communicating that being Jewish was now not only appropriate but even appreciated. One can only ask to what extent this attitude is a step towards the normalization of majority-minority balanced and mutually beneficial coexistence or a phase of cultural appropriation characterized by fetishization and exoticization of the Jew.

This approach most likely enhanced Jewish self-acceptance and approving perception. For most of society, it may represent an exit strategy to mitigate failure after vainly seeking to fill the abysmal void left by the missing Jews. A certain nostalgia for Jews can be traced in many places where they once lived throughout Europe to North Africa and, recently, even the Middle East. This feature is often reflected by popular culture and its manifestation varies, assuming the nature of the local environment. Interestingly, there is a flowing tendency to portray the Jews not only as stereotyped figures in a reductive manner but increasingly as multidimensional universal characters, retroactively acknowledging their whole authentic presence.

Jews were always present in Europe in sufficient numbers to channel socioeconomic crises repercussions, as the ancestral Other being for centuries instrumentalized as a screen to project majorities' inner and outer struggles.

Compensatory mechanisms of an unofficial affirmative action spontaneously activated after the end of the Cold War in Central and Eastern Europe came too late for many Jews. After the long twentieth century, the invitation to the table providing a particular advantage compared to other minorities may look suspicious and appear as another instrument of othering. Those members of the Jewish community in Czechia who accepted the privilege given by the majority often prefer to maintain the mentioned inconspicuousness and low profile, carefully following the societal mood so as not to be too different (too Jewish) and fall out of favor.

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45 Stanislaw Krajewski, "The Concept of De-Assimilation as a Tool to Describe Present-Day European Jews: The Example of Poland" (2022), https://www.eurojewishstudies.org/conference-grant-programme-reports/report-a-jewish-europe-virtual-and-real-life-spaces-in-the-21st-century/.

46 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979).

The findings of this long-term qualitative research are not entirely encouraging. Conjointly with the global decline of democracy lasting almost two decades,[47] visibly growing nationalism, nativism, and populism, European Jews once again experience the role of those who are here to be blamed (or praised) for ruling the world, having too much power or as a novelty of the twentieth and twenty-first century, for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In parallel, we witness an apparent surge among those who eventually embraced their Jewish roots by finding a distinct path and formulating a new story: often, however, co-creating the story with those who share identical values and motivations rather than joint ethnic backgrounds.

47 "Global Freedom Declines for 17th Consecutive Year, but May Be Approaching a Turning Point," Freedom House, New Report, March 9, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-freedom-declines-17th-consecutive-year-may-be-approaching-turning-point.