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TRANSGENERATIONAL HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN SLOVAKIA: FROM FORGETTING TO AMBIVALENCE ABOUT THE ROOTS OF HATRED

This article explores Holocaust memory in Slovakia, shedding light on how Slovak citizens perceive this past and its transgenerational transmission. The data presented were gathered in 2023 through ethnographic fieldwork and focus group interviews with informants belonging to three generations (between ages of 18 and 95), in three different locations across the country: Krupina, Prešov, and Bratislava. The initial findings show that Slovakia has been moving from indifference towards the Holocaust to the limited capability of realizing the actual causes and effects of atrocities, while at the same time officially accepting the commemorative centrality of the Holocaust.

Keywords: Holocaust, memory, forgetting, commemoration, transmission, Slovakia

The Holocaust in Slovakia was a part of wider project of fascist destruction across Europe, but it also showed several specificities. Among them, two are worthy of attention regarding the memory and commemoration of the Holocaust. The first is the existence of the fascist puppet state known as the Slovak Republic (1939–1945) and its own responsibility and initiatives in the extermination of its Jewish population. Without direct pressure from Nazi Germany, Slovak fascists themselves initiated and adopted racial laws and executed the first waves of deportations in their own capacities – and even paid 500 German marks per each person to be deported (see Kamenec, 2002; Salner, 2000). Thus, it might be argued that the Slovaks

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themselves sent their Jewish neighbours to the concentration and extermination camps in a state-organized manner incomparable to that of neighbouring countries (Kamenec, 2002). Despite the contemporary Slovak Republic (established in 1993) taking its legitimacy from the uninterrupted existence of Czechoslovakia (established in 1918) and officially distancing itself from the puppet war-time Slovakia, the active contribution of significant parts of the Slovak 'nation' to Jewish extermination has been exceptional. This perspective of the perpetrator, however, seems to be forgotten by the Slovaks.

The second specific element of Holocaust memory stems from the fact that the level of assistance and help to the suffering Jews was also extraordinarily high. Some scholars argue that the number of Righteous among the Nations per capita in the case of Slovaks is exceptionally high, if compared to similar countries. It might be worth considering the social organization of the war time state, dominated by self-subsistent, independent peasants that played a role in the nature and structure of racial violence or the lack thereof. The anti-fascist history of Slovakia, exemplified by the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 against the Slovak State – in fact the Slovak civil war – led to popular memory also being whitewashed by the democratic freedom fighting. The goals of the uprising, in which also many Jews fought, was the re-installation of a democratic Czechoslovakia.

Unfortunately, the liberating Red Army not only brought an end to the suppression of Nazi Germany and Slovak fascists, but it also gradually led to the installation of the communist dictatorship following the February 1948 coup d'etat. The introduction of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia, with its own political terror, showing often antisemitic elements, and meant that for the following forty years up until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Holocaust memory was not a subject of thorough commemoration, nor thorough public reflection. Slovakia, therefore, used to suffer of forgetting or selective commemoration due to the existence of totalitarian communism whose regime of 'truth' radically influenced the way people remember the Holocaust and racial hatred today. As we argue in this paper, the actual commemoration of the Holocaust in Slovakia is ambivalent, meaning that the roots of tensions and conflicts – regardless of ethnicity or religion – have not been adequately recognized by its people.

Many social scientists studying memory have argued that remembering is both a process and a practice (see Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995; Assmann, 2001; Assmann and Shortt, 2012; Wertsch, 2002, 2012). While Maurice Halbwachs (1992) emphasized the importance of individual's membership(s) in various social groups for memory formation and remembering, Paul Connerton (1989) argued that the key role in transmission of memories was played by the older generations sharing their recollections and knowledge with the younger ones. This imparting, in his view, is further ensured by rituals and commemorations (Connerton, 1989; see also Pine et al., 2004).

Exploring the processes of remembering and forgetting, scholars have distinguished between personal, familial, national, or collective memory (see Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992; Wertsch, 2002, 2009), and cultural memory (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995), shedding light on the social aspects of remembering. Some have also studied the politics of memory in more detail, focusing on what is being remembered, by whom, and why; and ways in which what is desirable to be remembered changes in contexts of power dynamics and socio-political shifts (see Pine et al., 2004). In our research, we have also tried to examine these aspects of

remembering (or forgetting), while exploring the present meanings of the past – specifically the memory of the Holocaust. As we show, sometimes – especially if being of uncomfortable nature – memories can be altered (or self-censored or manipulated) and the past even deliberately 'forgotten'.

Those who tend to remember, despite everything, whether they talk about their memories or keep them hidden, usually belong to the categories of victims, or the witnesses (who may or may not have taken a more active role), or the perpetrators themselves. With the passing of time, more recent studies have also paid attention to intergenerational transmission of memories and trauma, exploring how the descendants – also called the second generation – perceive and relate to the lived experiences and memories of their older kin, and create what Marianne Hirsch (1999; 2008) called 'postmemory'. These memories, however, often need to be navigated and made sense of in light of the larger national narratives one faces at school or during our everyday lives (see also Pine et al., 2004; Wertsch, 2002). This politics of memory, and the processes surrounding remembering or forgetting, as well as the transmission of knowledge and memories or the lack thereof, is at the centre of our exploration presented on the following pages.

This article is based on data collected in 2023 during an international research project exploring the Holocaust memory and its present meanings among three generations of Jews as well as non-Jews.[1] The project examined intergenerational transmission of knowledge about the Holocaust in three localities per country, within four countries of the Visegrad region. In Slovakia, for this pilot study, we selected the following locations: Krupina, Prešov, and Bratislava. The chosen methodology of the project was ethnographic fieldwork and focus group interviews. Our interview partners were chosen in such a way that they would represent various socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and belong to one of the three studied generations: 18–39, 40–69, and 70+ years old; thus, being able to reflect on their lived experiences and transgenerational transmission of memories (or the lack thereof) in light of changing socio-political contexts.

THE CONTEXT OF COMMEMORATION

By 2023, when the data for this project was collected, almost all of the victims of fascist and Stalinist crimes, jails and work camps, secret police investigations and tortures, had passed away. Only older seniors recalled the memories of Soviet tanks that entered Czechoslovakia in August 1968, and remembered the depth of compromise with the regime, not least regarding the interpretation of the Second World War and of the Holocaust. The politics of memory in Slovakia today suffers of double totalitarian heritage. It has been especially dangerous how the

[1] We would like to thank the Visegrad Fund for supporting this research and enabling us to strengthen research cooperation with our international partners. We would also like to express our gratitude to the people without whom none of this would be possible – our informants. We are grateful for their time and for sharing with us their thoughts, perceptions and memories. We are also thankful to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

populist regimes, by Vladimír Mečiar (1994–1998) and recently under the fourth government of Robert Fico (since 2023) challenge the democratic commemoration canon of the Slovak past. Although only small parts of the political spectrum represent Holocaust deniers since 1989, the nostalgia for the autocratic regimes by the populist politics of memory has often been undermining the democratic public pedagogy. The Holocaust memory modification has not been under direct attack officially, but the ambivalence towards the responsibilities of individual perpetrators and actions of crimes or the relativization of memories of suffering have been very much present.

One direct tradition that contemporary Slovak radicals have been inspired by has been known as *klérofašizmus* (clerical fascism). It used to be characterized by the close ties of the Catholic clergy with fascist politics. The historian Miloslav Szabó (2019, p. 24) adopted the opinion of Roger Griffin on clerical fascism as the fascist radicalization of individual priests, not churches. In the case of Slovakia, radical ethnic nationalism was mixed with Catholic counter-enlightenment thought into a unique fascist synthesis, comparable by its state-based systemic parameters to the national fascism of the Ustashe in Croatia. Ethnic nationalism found legitimacy through its ties with Catholicism.

In the Kingdom of Hungary, where modern Slovak political thought originates, the Peoples' Party was founded toward the end of nineteenth century. The major factor of mobilization was the fight against liberalism as symbolized by progressive transformations of the economy and society. Backed up by the encyclical Rerum novarum of 1891 by Leo XIII (1810–1903) that addressed capitalist industrialization, the particular issue became the introduction of secular marriages and divorces as well as the deepening of emancipation of Jews. Since the period when Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938) became the profiling figure of the Slovak Peoples' Party (established in 1905) the anti-Hungarian element came to dominate the Catholic popular movement. The party's antiliberalism nevertheless continued to be prominent throughout the period of the Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938). It was then radically incorporated into the political system of the Slovak Republic (1939–1945) of which the Slovak Peoples' Party became the only party representative.

However, Slovak protestant conservativism also had strong counter-enlightenment tendencies. In the later years of his life, Ľudovít Štúr (1815–1956), the leader of the national movement, strongly advocated for conservativism, monarchy and Orthodox religion under the leading role of the Russian Czar as a barrier against (Western) liberalism. Many Slovak Lutherans supported the nationalist-conservative Slovak National Party (1871–1838), the oldest party of Slovaks, with suspicious attitudes towards the ideas of progressivism and holding the antisemitic opinions. Slovak national conservativism has been also anti-Czech, as it considered the Czech culture 'godless' and liberal. It also fought against 'Judeo-Bolshevism' represented by the Soviet regime.

The period of the Second World War represented the climax of clerical fascism in Slovakia and the legacy of this period has been vital, especially for the nationalist legitimization battles in the post-1989 period. The emigre circles from among the prominent supporters of the Slovak State (1939–1945), who enjoyed freedom in Western Europe and North America despite their ties to Slovak fascism, contributed greatly to the vitality of these battles. The catch-all party of the autocratic Vladimír Mečiar, considered by some to be the founder of

independent Slovakia in 1993, skilfully used ethnic nationalism and this unofficial legacy of clerical fascism.

During the socialist era, many clerical and lay persons in the official church as well as in dissent grew up with admiration or at least tolerance for the authoritarian regime of the president-priest Jozef Tiso (1887–1947). Various fringe parties directly claimed to be descendants of the fascist Hlinka Slovak Peoples' Party after 1989 but not until the success of Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko in 2016, whose representatives consistently sympathized with the clerical fascism of the Slovak Republic (1939–1945), has such a party received wide support.

There are several cases of open support for the fascists from among the Slovak clergy today. In Čadca, northern Slovakia, in August 2014, on the anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising (1944), the anti-fascist state holiday, Father Emil Floriš declared from the pulpit that Jews were responsible for the Holocaust, "because there was hatred against them, but many times they brought this hatred upon themselves." Floriš projected the same fate for the Roma. His words caused outrage, and the police investigated the statement, but they ultimately closed the case because his words were not considered to be a crime. His diocese argued that the priest focused on parish history, stressed the deep roots of the unfriendly relationship between the Slovaks and Jews in the locality, and the diocese distanced itself from any form of xenophobia.[2] Retired Colonel Ignác Juruš, the first military abbot of the Slovak Army after 1989, and two other clergymen were admonished by their superiors in 2017 for their support of the fascist party.[3] There has been a long history of statements by Catholic Church representatives, including Archbishop Emeritus Ján Sokol, the communist secret police collaborator, and the secret church representative Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec (1924–2015), who made it known that the period of the wartime Slovak Republic was a period of abundance and prosperity for Slovaks.

The importance of Catholicism in the political regime of present-day Slovakia began to rise immediately after the fall of state-socialism. At the time, the church was considered the enemy of the former regime and, therefore, having a particular right to regain high public recognition. This privileged position was ensured in the international agreement with the Holy See in 2000. Nevertheless, there have been several additional attempts to strengthen the position of the Church, both symbolically and in the actual legislative process.

The Holocaust was not questioned immediately, rather the opposite, the ritualized commemorations by the leading Slovak representatives took place in line with the official democratic profile of the country. The questioning of a democratic consensus, especially concerning the normalization period (1968–1989) and of the role of Soviet Union in the introduction of Stalinism, weakened this memory consensus. In her '"The Struggle for the

[2] 'Farár šokoval výrokmi na bohoslužbe: Židia si vraj mohli za deportácie sami a na rade sú Rómovia!'. [Priest made shocking statements during service: the Jews themselves were to blame for their own deportations, and the Roma are next!]. (2014, September 8). *Nový čas*. Retrieved from: https://www.cas.sk/clanok/292704/farar-sokoval-vyrokmi-na-bohosluzbe-zidia-si-vraj-mohli-za-deportacie-sami-a-na-rade-su-romovia/ [1.02.2020].

[3] 'Potrestali kňazov podporujúcich Kotlebovu stranu'. [Priests supporting Kotleba's party punished]. (2017, May 27). *Aktuality.sk.* Retrieved from: https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/491848/potrestali-knazov-podporujucich-kotlebovu-stranu/ [9.02.2020].

Memory of the Nation": Post-Communist Slovakia and its World War II Past' (2016, p. 992), Nadya Nedelsky argues:

> To draw Slovakia fully into the Western Holocaust consensus would thus require numerous powerful elites to reorient their principles and priorities, and the broader public to broaden its scope of moral concern. Such normative reorientation is a tall order, and does not simply follow from confrontation with historical facts. In the meantime, the combination of mainstream forgetting and reassertion of wartime values along the margins is worrisome. In an increasingly unsettled Europe, Slovakia's relationship to its fascist past bears careful watching.

Basing our arguments on the findings of representative group interviews (in various settings across Slovakia) about Holocaust memory (presented below), we confirm this unsettled feeling and ambivalence towards the past which is engendered by forgetting and rising far-right memory manipulation.

MEMORY OF GENERATIONS

"People, first and foremost," a pensioner in Prešov quickly answered our question about who the Jews are. What followed was a lively discussion among the pensioner club members who shared with us their knowledge, memories and opinions. Across our field sites, the oldest generation of our informants – especially in Prešov – knew the most about the Jewish population of their town and the Prešov pensioneers often noted they had personal acquaintances of Jewish origin. For our informants belonging to the middle and the young generations such experiences, as well as knowledge associated with them, were much rarer. Despite these personal differences, the overarching narrative was – across all our field sites and generations – the same.

"They were well-represented in the business community. It's also because of the historical reason that they weren't allowed to do all the things that original inhabitants were allowed to do, so they got into that business and banking sector," a young man in Prešov argued and, highlighting the difference to the majority society, he added, "mainly the financial sector, the banking, and the business environment. Less so the peasantry because they couldn't own any land." A student in Krupina, similarly, stated, "[t]hey were primarily merchants. So that's what set them apart. Maybe they had more possessions than other people in this district. As it was a poorer region, mainly consisting of farmers." While pensioners in Prešov repeatedly noted that "Jews were very educated," a young man in Bratislava added to this narrative also that "[t]hey were extremely skilled. In a variety of fields. Whether it was jewellery or other. All the jewellery shops were under Jewish control, and they knew how to pay attention to details."

People across all our focus groups associated Jews with professions in the fields of business, crafts or medicine. They all highlighted the perceived importance attributed to a higher level of education, and people often shared with us various stereotypical associations with Jews – such as in terms of money saving or being good businessmen. Younger generations – especially the high school students in Krupina – had a harder time articulating their thoughts

when it came to the Jewish population in their region or Slovakia as such. Only a few had some knowledge which was mostly based on their own interests, seeing a movie or reading a book related to the topic.

While informants across all generations shared with us the above-mentioned stereotypes, interestingly, some informants belonging to the oldest generation, in all three field sites, mentioned several stories highlighting the goodness and willingness to help that their older kin, if not themselves, have experienced with their Jewish neighbours, doctors, shopkeepers, and acquaintances. "I remember my mom telling me that only Jews had shops. Doctors or pharmacists were Jews. Our people weren't like that. They were illiterate," a pensioner from Prešov shared with us, "my mother used to say that the shopkeeper was very accommodating. With six children, when her father came once in a while to buy shoes or something like that, they didn't have to pay the whole amount. So, he was accommodating. They could still pay it later." Several people mentioned similar stories of how the shopkeepers were helping them or how the Jewish doctor would come to treat them even in the middle of the night, building an accompanying narrative of Jewish neighbours being remembered as compassionate, kind-hearted and willing to find a way to help when needed. When we then followed with the question asking what, in their opinion, have been the causes of antisemitism and persecutions of Jews, our inquiry was often met with a moment of silence.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE CAUSES OF ANTISEMITISM AND PERSECUTIONS OF JEWS?

Reflecting on this question, people mentioned several, for them, possible causes, such as the economic inequality or perceptions of difference stimulating misunderstanding, intolerance and conflicts. "They had the most wealth," a young student in Krupina tried to explain what could have contributed to the persecutions of Jews in Slovakia. "They were regarded as different people," his classmate added. When we asked him to elaborate on what he meant by 'different', he replied, "I don't know, but people did not like that they were here with them." "There was racial hatred towards them – even though the Jews are not a different race. They differ only by religion. But there was hatred from the German side towards them," another of their classmates contributed to the discussion. A slight pause was later interrupted by a young girl reasoning, "[i]t originated out of ideology. Among the people it manifested via envy. But it came out of ideology, which I think was quite well thought out. Then it was followed by various specific interests of people here."

The narrative of inequality and envy was mentioned by all generations, across all three field sites. "In my opinion, maybe it had something to do with the fact that they were merchants. They liked to trade. So, they were perhaps, in terms of society, a wealthy minority," a young man in Bratislava argued, "and automatically, as a richer minority is created in a society, the poorer people perhaps feel that their poverty may be due to these richer people. Maybe it has something to do with that. At least in my opinion." To which another young man reacted stating, "[o]r just pure human jealousy", and the group nodded in agreement.

"Well, precisely because they were very clever, very rich. They had a completely different lifestyle. They were such a thorn in the side," a young woman in Prešov argued and added:

> In my opinion. When I want to destroy an enemy, then someone who's strong. I'm not going to go after some poor guy who has nothing. And there they could have Aryanized. When the weak ones who previously had nothing came to power, those who had something paid the price. When the great tide rises against them, it simply destroys them. Hitler knew that. And he also knew who he had to destroy.

Many people, like another young woman from this focus group, however, highlighted also the aspect of difference: "I think it is also the cultural differences. They just came from a different area, had different traditions," she reasoned and added, "[a]lso, the Roma are a thorn in the side of a lot of people because they are just different, they have different traditions. I think the majority of the population can't understand them. They always find somebody to point the finger at. And that's the way it happened, I guess." Several informants pointed to such narrative of Jews not fitting in, mostly in terms of them isolating themselves, what then in their opinions led to misunderstandings and the lack of acceptance.

A few people, usually one or two per field site, have also mentioned hatred based on, what they called, "religious reasons". Specifically, in line with how one of the women in Prešov's pensioner club formulated her thoughts: "As for what I have heard about the Jews, maybe that's why people were angry at them, because the Jews had crucified the son of God. The son of God who created this world, and also us. So probably that's why they hated them so much." Later, during the discussion, another woman from this group of pensioners stated, "[b]ut I don't think that the hatred came from the Slovaks, because we certainly helped many Jews to survive. People were hiding them, and the children were sent elsewhere. I wonder why Hitler hated them so much. I haven't read about that anywhere."

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR?

When we asked questions trying to find out what people knew about the persecutions of Jews in Slovakia since 1938, their life during the Holocaust and the period of the Slovak State, and their eventual deportations to concentration camps, our informants usually briefly noted that Jews were deported by trains, that it was mostly to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and that most of them passed away there or emigrated after the war. In most groups it took further questioning to get people to also reflect on other issues. In general, however, discussing the deportations was the part of interviews when our informants tended to get quieter and often expressed their lack of knowledge.

Asking the high school students in Krupina to elaborate on what they meant when they said there were no Jews there anymore and why they thought that was the case, a young girl explained:

> Because they were first displaced from here and then killed. So, they didn't even have the opportunity to come back here. Actually, they probably didn't even want to return, when they were possibly denounced and Aryanized by the people they used to live with before.

Trying to see what the students knew about the deportations and Aryanizations, we asked further open questions to motivate students to share with us more. "They were chasing them or something… They tried to gather them in one place to keep them under control," one of the students said and his classmate added, "Slovakia was an ally of Germany, so the Slovaks – the ordinary Slovaks – were actually not doing badly at that time. But that doesn't mean it wasn't a bad situation." A young man in Bratislava highlighted this matter as well:

> We were like some kind of showcase for Germany. The fascism was on the rise. The Slovak State became its satellite. The authorities, led by Tiso, tried to set an example. There were laws passed – some Aryan laws, which were said to be stricter than the German ones. It wasn't a bed of roses for the Jews here. In fact, it was perhaps even worse here than in Germany.

Despite not knowing the details, a few informants from the youngest generation had some knowledge about the Holocaust in general. Yet, they often reminded us that these topics were covered very marginally at school, if at all, and what they knew they had learned mostly on their own while reading books or watching documentary films.

Though having some idea about the Holocaust, Aryanizations and deportations in general, young people often did not know about the local history of the Holocaust or persecutions of Jews and other minorities in their own hometowns. Many of them were uncertain about the numbers of Jews who lived in their hometown or in Slovakia as such, or about the numbers of people who were deported to concentration camps. This was, however, also present among the older generations. When we asked whether people had an idea of how many Jews lived in Slovakia (or their town or region) before the Second World War or how many were deported, people were quiet and usually expressed their lack of knowledge about this. Only a few times they tried to guess and usually stating much lower numbers than those recorded by the censuses and other historical sources. Most people did not mention any labour or concentration camps in Slovakia. Only a few briefly referred to the labour camp in Sereď and just one young man from Bratislava knew about the concentration camp in Patrónka.

As many pointed out to us, "these were not the topics we discussed". Often not at home and, as many of our informants argued, nor at school. "We weren't really informed about it. It was a dry piece of information that passed by," an older man in Krupina told us, "[o] nly after the revolution, we visited Auschwitz, and we were also shown around those camps. Also, when the Memorial [of the Slovak National Uprising] was built in Banská Bystrica, for example, it was shown there. Partially… It was possible to get some information. But we weren't led to do that – to search for more."

TRACES OF MEMORY

Faced with the question of whether there were any Jews in Krupina today, a group of older women in their seventies and eighties looked at us perplexed and explained: "There are no Jews anymore – but we have a Jewish cemetery. With gravestones. Nice one. We do have it." Facing the reality of this region – and the decimating effects of the Holocaust, four decades of Socialist regime as well as the local popularity of the far-right political party LSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia) – one of them remarked, "they do live, but outside of

Krupina, for example, also those who are originally from Krupina." Many towns in Slovakia share a similar story of a cemetery being often the only remaining trace of their Jewish past.

In each of our focus groups, when prompted to think about Jewish places or monuments in their towns, people always mentioned the cemetery as the first thing that came to their mind – and sometimes it was sadly the only place they related with the Jewish history in their town. Asking about such 'Jewish spaces' high school students in Krupina, after a moment of silence, one student noted, "[t]here is, for example, a Jewish cemetery in Krupina". But when asked whether he had been there, he admitted, "I walked past it, but honestly… It's in such a place that, in my opinion, not many people even know we have it there."

When we later followed with a question whether there are any other places related to the Jewish community in the town, another student explained: "Maybe there is… The cemetery is probably the most prominent in terms of popularity in Krupina. Although it's also not very well known because it's not in the city centre. It's a bit of a remote area." And then he elaborated: "That's more of a question for someone who belongs or belonged to that Jewish community if there's something like that to be found here. Because I don't think we have any knowledge about it."

"Over here, we don't know about it," another student argued, "but maybe if the town historian tells us. He would certainly know all about this… But, between us, we have not been told about this at all. Nobody here is telling us any substantial information about it. We basically have nowhere to find out." Trying to explain further why they do not know about the local Jewish history, another student added: "Because just as we don't have knowledge about it, I don't think the older ones, like our parents or people who have lived here longer, have that kind of knowledge. Most of the time you stumble upon places like this by accident. You walk past something, and someone around maybe knows what it is. People don't talk about the existence of these places."

Interestingly, young people argued that they were unaware – about the Jewish life in their region and the traces of its memory, as well as the local Holocaust memory – because no one told them about it; that maybe the town historian could share more with them; and, significantly, that "that's more of a question for someone who belongs or belonged to that Jewish community". All these arguments raise important questions concerning issues of intergenerational transmission of knowledge and memory, as well as a matter of whose past is it and who should know about it and do the remembering. In other words, what should be remembered and by whom? Who should do the remembering?

When we asked the same question of the oldest generation of our informants in Krupina – the group of five pensioners – the Jewish cemetery was again given as the main example, as noted above, and when prompted to think about some other places of remembrance of Jews in Krupina and its surroundings, and whether they know where Jews used to live in Krupina, they agreed that there are not many places that would bear the connection:

> You know, everything has already been rebuilt in Krupina. Most of them are modern houses already. The houses they had are already demolished. The Jews always had nice houses, but they don't exist anymore. For example, even here where the House of Services is, I remember there was a doctor there. We used to go there to have our eyes checked. But there's a new building now. Where those two houses used to be, that's where the school is now. There's a school already built instead of them. So, it's all already redone and changed.

When one of them mentioned that "[t]here used to be also a synagogue – people say that the synagogue is actually HONT-stav now," the rest of the group was surprised and then nodded, realising that could be the case. "You're right. It's just that again – it's reconstructed for civil purposes. It's not a synagogue anymore," another one pointed and, explaining the context, added: "[t]here wouldn't be anybody to meet in that synagogue anymore when… We don't have Jews here anymore. It's just gone."

Facing the question about the traces of memory and the local Jewish community, all our interviews were marked by, often long, moments of silence. As if people were trying to remember, if they ever possessed such knowledge at all, and at the same time pondering and looking for reasons why they do not know or remember, or why it is difficult to point to such places now. One of the reasons, as pointed out by the Krupina pensioners, could be the fact that, especially during Socialism, Jewish places of worship, community centres or houses were often demolished – thus not reminding (or, possibly, to not remind) the passers-by about the community that 'disappeared' (whether during the tragedy of the Holocaust or within waves of emigration) – or nationalised and reappropriated for different purposes (e.g. synagogues were used as warehouses or turned into shops, among other things).

In Prešov, where the Jewish community, although being rather small, still maintains active communal life, people nonetheless started their answers to this question by stating that there is a Jewish cemetery. The only exception was that in Prešov people also mentioned that there is a beautiful synagogue, which is open to the public and not only hosts the town's Jewish Museum, but often also various summer concerts.

"In the city, I know only about the cemetery. And there is also a section dedicated to Jews at the back of the main cemetery," a middle-aged woman shared with us, trying to list places she associated with the Jewish life in the town of Prešov. After a short pause, suddenly, she added,

> And that synagogue! We used to walk past it all the time. It was behind an iron fence. There was an iron gate at the back. We knew it was Jewish, so we couldn't go there. It was closed, abandoned, and overgrown with weeds. Only now it's taken care of. But when we used to go past it as children, our parents would say 'that's Jewish' – and we knew it was something different than us.

This sense of difference was also highlighted by another young woman who admitted to us how she came to perceive such differentiation played out in the context of cemetery-maintenance as a child:

> Subconsciously, we depreciated it. I remember as a child that the Jewish cemetery was always broken, old, where even the teachers wouldn't let us go saying 'Don't go there, you'll break your leg.' 'Why?' 'Because it's Jewish.' 'Why it looks like this when there's this big, nice graveyard right next to it?' 'Because that one is Jewish.' It was as if it's only Jewish, so it's neglected. In my mind, a Jewish cemetery is something broken and neglected. So subconsciously, I have it in me that it's nothing – nothing precious, nothing someone would want to save.

This quote, saddening as it is, points to various larger issues at hand. In the context of this paper, we can see the transmission of knowledge – or in this case the lack thereof – as well as the politics of memory and questions of who should do the remembering (and caring).

This issue was reflected upon slightly differently among the oldest generation of our non-Jewish informants in Prešov, many of them sharing with us that they themselves had Jewish friends, teachers, doctors or neighbours. While not necessarily knowing much about the history or the Jewish life in town per se, they related to the matter differently. When we asked about the places they associated with the Jewish community in town, the first thing they mentioned was a fountain built by a Jewish businessman in the city centre. "Then the Jewish cemetery," one person added and another continued: "Memorial stones. Stolpersteine. Too bad there are so few of them. Because a lot of people from here were deported to concentration camps. And they didn't return. We only have them in two places in Prešov. Near PKO and on Sabinovska Street." "We have also a synagogue," another person remarked, "and then also some cultural events take place. They are held, for example, in the museum, or in libraries. They organise events to celebrate, for example, birthday anniversaries of some important figures. Also, the 'Discovering Prešov' event, where we visited the synagogue several times." The group of pensioners agreed they enjoyed visiting the synagogue, during concerts it sometimes hosts, but also when visiting the Jewish Museum: "the caretaker guides visitors when more people come. He shows them the upstairs exhibition as well. It's a nice museum with paintings."

Many of the members of the pensioner club with whom we spoke have attended various cultural and educational events organised by the town or the club itself. Among which were also the mentioned walk across the town called 'Discovering Prešov', where the aforementioned fountain is talked about. The fact that there used to be more synagogues in Prešov, however, was not mentioned. While the Orthodox synagogue has been visited by many of our informants, the Neolog synagogue – presently being used as a warehouse and a store with household goods – is often no longer associated with the town's Jewish life.

When we asked our informants in Bratislava whether they could tell us about some places associated with the Jewish community, the narrative was very similar. Some people knew there was a synagogue in town, some had knowledge about a Jewish cemetery, and some have heard about the Chatam Sofer Memorial – though not knowing precisely what it was. When talking about the synagogue, a few people had knowledge about the Neolog synagogue that was demolished in 1969, which maintains its presence in absence (or vice versa) through a marking of its walls on the ground and a photographic exhibition about the building and its demolition, signifying a trace of memory, on Rybne Square, and a very few – usually only one person in each focus group – knew about the functioning synagogue on Heydukova Street. The whereabouts of the Jewish cemeteries, if mentioned at all, were uncertain. The Chatam Sofer Memorial, although still covered with a veil of mystery concerning what it was and who Chatam Sofer used to be, was known to a few also because a tram stop located near the memorial was named after it.

The dialogue which occurred in response to our question among the oldest generation in Bratislava nicely illustrates the workings of remembering and forgetting:

– "In Bratislava, there is that synagogue on Heydukova Street. I haven't been there for a while."

– "Our boys were there on an excursion, in that Jewish synagogue in Bratislava. They brought me pictures from there."

– "They're everywhere. I was in Prague recently, too. The synagogue there is beautiful."

– "The synagogue in Lučenec has been renovated."
– "Yes. Too bad it wasn't preserved in Pezinok."
– "When it disappears, the traces disappear. They'll be completely obliterated."
– "There was another synagogue in Bratislava just under the castle, wasn't it?"
– "Yes, where the highway is."
– "Near the Fisherman's Gate, or what's it called."
– "Yes. In the 1970s everything changed there. They built that SNP Bridge and everything changed. Or maybe sooner even? After the war? I don't know."

When we asked whether there were any other traces of the existence of the Jewish community or memorials for the victims of the Holocaust, one of the informants said, "there must be something", and the group continued to think in silence. Not finding the answer, another one noted: "I have visited Sereď. Back when the museum was opened. […] There you can get into it very well – you can imagine and try to put yourself into that situation." "Just like in Auschwitz," another woman added, "[i]f someone can't go all the way to Poland, then Sereď, here in Slovakia, is a good place for students to visit. But also for anyone else."

Bringing attention to the labour camp in Sereď was important in demonstrating their knowledge that there are places with dark past associated with the Holocaust in Slovakia as well. Yet, the question about the existence of a Shoah memorial in Bratislava was left unanswered.

"Jewish cemetery," a young student quickly answered, reflecting on the traces of Jewish life in Bratislava, and the group of young adults started to brainstorm, sharing with us "[t]here is a memorial for the demolished synagogue near St. Martin's Cathedral, and above the bridge, there is the Jewish Street and the Jewish Museum…"; "synagogue on Heydukova Street"; and "I think there is still a Jewish cemetery above the Chatam Sofer Memorial." While one young man argued he had visited Prague and found its Jewish past "nicely preserved," but when it came to his own town of Bratislava he did not know about such traces, another man surprised us with his knowledge about an Orthodox synagogue which was demolished during Socialism: "there used to be a synagogue even on Zámocká Street. There is a memorial plaque that there once was a synagogue there."

When we asked whether there was a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust or something similar in town, the whole group became quiet and sat in silence. One young man said, "we certainly have something…" and another one agreed, "we certainly do." After a while of sitting in silence and pondering where such a memorial site could be, one student looked up and admitted: "[e]ven if there is, it's probably a mistake that we don't know about it. The fact that we are thinking about it and still don't know is a mistake."

TRANSMISSION (AND CONCEALMENT) OF KNOWLEDGE

Not knowing was often explained among our informants by arguing that no one told them about it – whether "it" was the local Jewish history, the Holocaust, or the traces of Jewish past in their region (or in Slovakia as such). No matter what question we were discussing,

throughout our interviews, the majority of people would repeatedly argue that growing up or even now, they did not talk about things related to the Holocaust or the Jewish community in their region. Not with their parents, nor their families, or friends. It was interesting to follow their argumentations and see how these differed sightly depending on where the person grew up, as well as on the socio-political context in which they were growing up. While the narrative of 'not knowing due to not being talked or taught about' was prevalent largely among the middle and the young generations across all three field sites, differences were visible within the oldest generation of our informants.

When we asked the group of pensioners in Krupina, all aged 70 years and more, whether while they were growing up anyone told them about the Second World War, the Holocaust or what happened to the Jews, the women agreed that it was not a topic to be discussed. "Nothing at all about the Holocaust. At least I don't know anything about it," one of them said and another one added, "No. My father didn't like to talk about the war. He really disliked talking about it." "Even if there was something, they said 'Not for your ears. Nothing to interest you. What has been has already been. Leave it alone.' Parents didn't want to talk about it anymore after that," one woman explained and another one reacted, "I don't know if I'd even want to know." This statement triggered a reaction of the rest of the group: "Exactly!" "You know," one woman said, leaving space for the understanding of what was left unsaid, and then another one tried to explain further, "we didn't ask, so they couldn't tell us," and her friend added:

> And we had no one to ask. I didn't know my grandparents on either side. I didn't know my mother. I had only my dad. Well. And, as I said, he was the way he was. He didn't want to talk about it. Although, I know some little bits and pieces. When he was in the mood, he'd say something.

After a moment of silence, they continued explaining, "People were also scared. When it came to this, people were scared to talk." "Yes. 'Leave it, don't even talk about it.'," one of them described the reactions of their older kin when they as children wanted to know more. "But they were also afraid in general, you know, when this was happening, that they were taking the Jews, they were taking the Roma, and I don't know what. As the situation was changing, people retreated," one of the women elaborated on the matter and group agreed that these topics were considered a taboo and were not discussed. When we asked them why they think that was, a woman reasoned:

> Well, it wasn't supposed to be. Maybe it should have and could have been talked about, just not on such a broad forum. You know. Maybe people talked among themselves. They talked. Especially the older ones. We were sort of excluded because they didn't know who was going to say something somewhere. It was difficult.

The situation as described by the oldest generations in Bratislava and Prešov was also similar when they were growing up. They did not learn about these issues at school, nor could talk about it in public. "It was a taboo," people often explained. The difference, however, was that some of them grew up at homes where their parents or family members would tell them at least some information about the Jewish community, its particular members, or the Second World War.

From the stories our informants shared with us, it was even more prevalent in Prešov which, being a smaller town than Bratislava, offered a space where people knew each other more. Growing up, many of our informants from the oldest generation had family friends, classmates, neighbours, doctors or teachers who were Jewish. Some had knowledge about their Jewish descent while growing up, some learned about it only later in life.

When we asked them whether they were taught about the war and the Holocaust at school, many argued that this topic was not discussed at length. One of our informants explained:

> We didn't learn anything about the Jews and that subject. Actually, in one sentence, that there were concentration camps, and that there were Jews there. But we didn't learn about the city as such or about the cities where they lived. I know, for example, that Jews were not allowed to come here until a certain century. That the town was enclosed by a wall. And then after a while they were allowed to enter one by one. But that was the kind of history that I just read or heard about. But if I want to be specific about how we came into contact: we went to school together, we lived next to each other. As children or teenagers, we didn't feel any hatred.

"But we didn't even know that our classmates were Jewish. We didn't know then," a woman sitting next to her argued – to which her friend reacted, "sometimes we did." "I knew – because they were my classmates from the first grade. I knew about some of them," another woman shared with us and continued, "here on the Main Street, there were five families like that. There was a Jewish family living in our house, too. We got along very well as children. Then, at some point, they emigrated. Because they had the opportunity to leave. And maybe even from 2–3 houses here on the Main Street." Many of them remembered a family or two who emigrated right after the war or during late 1960s. Some shared with us that they still have Jewish friends whom they have known since their childhood.

> We are friends since the primary school and we're in our seventies now. I just wanted to say that there was no hostility as far as we knew. And if they didn't know they were Jewish… I really didn't even have to know myself that someone was Jewish. We lived next door to each other.

Reflecting on the issue of the transmission of memory and knowledge, many repeatedly stated the official schooling system did not provide them with much information on the matter:

> I was born 9 years after the war, in 1954, and all I knew about the Jews was… Well, from school, almost nothing, except for that one sentence that there were some concentration camps. But what I knew was mostly from my parents and my grandparents. Even then, only such mentions like 'He's a Jew'. Someone who was known to be a Jew was immediately identified.

Close kin often, according to our informants, tried to explain and answer the questions of their grand/children.

> As children we used to go for the so-called compulsory 'labelling' [a chest X-ray] and in Prešov there was a lady there who had a number on her arm. And when I asked at home about it, I was told that these were the numbers of people – of Jews – who had been in the concentration camps. And she, specifically, was lucky that she came back.

Looking at the data from our focus groups with the middle and young generations, across all our field sites, it appears that the efforts to transmit knowledge about these issues eased up, and the majority of our informants from these generations agreed that topics related to the Jews or the Holocaust were not discussed at home. "At home we never talked about it," a middle-aged woman admitted to us, and her male friend elaborated, "We are more familiar with it from movies like 'The Shop on the Main Street'. It was not really discussed in the public. Actually, Socialism also made the Jewish issue sort of invisible. Covered and secret. There weren't any open debates." Several of our informants highlighted the matter of secrecy, often referring to the word 'taboo', and pointed to issues of uncertainty and insecurity. "Maybe they were afraid to talk about it, lest we say somewhere what we talk about at home. Maybe they had some sense of complicity for something? It's hard to say," another middle-aged man tried to reason why his older kin never spoke about the past, "there was definitely something there why they didn't want to talk about it – primarily that fear. That period before the revolution wasn't so wonderful."

A few informants from the middle and the young generation, in their efforts to explain why their parents or grandparents never spoke about the Holocaust or their Jewish neighbours, reflected on the possibility for their silence being a strategy chosen to cope with issues of guilt and shame. "Maybe some families cooperated with the Hlinka regime. That's why they don't want to talk about it at home now out of shame," a young man in Prešov noted, to which a young woman sitting next to him stated, "[m]aybe some people felt that the war was over, 'we're starting over, let's leave it alone'." Similar reasoning was mentioned to us also by a young man in Bratislava, "it was probably not a popular topic. Or maybe they were ashamed for that period. They didn't want to be reminded of it. They wanted to get over it somehow, so they preferred not to tell the next generation about it, and they thought 'let it die with us'," he said and added, "it's probably better to have peace. But we should learn from history, and it should be passed down."

Discussing the matters of knowledge transmission, it appeared that this particular past has been marked by terms such as heavy or dark, as well as uncomfortable, and the majority of our informants argued it was not something they have talked about at home or learnt much about at school. While the older generations often noted "why to talk about something like that – what could have been done? What was done, was done", the youngest generation seemed to have mixed emotions about it. Some argued it is an important part of history and it should be talked about – despite admitting they did not ask about it at home, nor necessarily looked for information themselves –, others preferred to leave the subject to rest.

"Jews and maybe deportations are taboo topics. It is not really talked about," a student in Krupina shared with us and when we asked why that was, after a short and hesitant silence, his schoolmate explained, "[d]efinitely because it's not a pleasant topic to talk about. I mean, not for everyone. […] Not everyone is comfortable talking about someone being systematically rounded up and exterminated." "And if people talk about it at all, it's usually, at least as I've heard, more about what happened in Germany rather than what happened in Slovakia. It's as if they're trying to forget about it. As if it didn't even exist here," he added. To which another his classmate reacted explaining,

> These are mainly topics that people disagree on. What is written in history – as they say that history is written by the winners – so not everybody agrees with that. Let's put it that way, those people who experienced it or were there may have a completely different opinion about it than what is mentioned on the Internet. Most of the time these accounts don't align.

"If I wanted to know more about it, I would maybe ask someone close to me instead of searching the Internet," another student contributed to the discussion, and added an important statement, "but I haven't asked about these topics specifically – not even once." And his schoolmate, sitting next to him, elaborated:

> In my opinion, maybe, they are also very difficult topics for someone to discuss. They bring up negative emotions. And mostly, the Second World War stuff is probably something that rather our great-grandparents could have told us about. Grandparents were already born after the war. That information is already fading with time basically. It's not passed down from generation to generation anymore. This is minimally, if at all, talked about. Mostly we deal with rather positive topics. And we talk about other things.

After a moment, he added, "[w]hile it's important to know the history, we tend to talk more about the present."

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

Interestingly, despite not talking about the Holocaust or issues concerning Jews in Slovakia at home – whether with their older or younger kin –, the majority of our informants agued it was important to teach the younger generations about the past, and specifically about the Holocaust and the fate of Slovak Jews. While two middle-aged women in one of the focus groups in Bratislava argued that the "Jews have been talked about too much" and "they were not the only ones who suffered during the war," most of our informants – across all field sites and generations – declared we ought to learn from the history to not repeat it and saw this topic as being important to talk about publicly and as an essential part of the school curriculum.

Many also highlighted that discussing and learning more about this specific period and part of our history has presently been a pressing matter. Some pointed to the rising popularity of the far-right political parties (also among the young first-time voters), others saw the importance of reflecting on the past in the context of the present situation in Ukraine.

"It needs to be discussed every day – because especially this younger generation gets less and less information about it. Then they are confused as to what to think. They need to be reminded on a daily basis," a young man argued, and his friend reacted pointing to the role of the schools in the process of transmission of knowledge, "we need to pay more attention to school curricula. Not to take it just as a concluded historical event, how those teachers are treating it. Maybe it's because they don't have more time to discuss it. Since the curriculum is holding them back." Another young man nodded, in agreement with what was said, and stated that, in his opinion, what was important was to "teach [students] how to work with information, and maybe [how] to analyse data, news, and overall information. Because [he]

really feel[s] that people in Slovakia will truly believe anything they read, anything that Facebook shows them. And without giving it any constructive thought at all." "Social networks are very dangerous at the moment," a young man sitting next to him added, "people share right away anything they see on social media. They just read the headline, don't even open it and they're already sharing anything. Without verification."

Even the informants from the youngest generation themselves perceived the risk of forgetting and the lack of reflection as important to be avoided if possible. When we asked this question the high school students in Krupina, they agreed that "[i]t is certainly a topic that should not be forgotten among us. It should be taught especially […] to promote understanding of what happened." When we tried to prompt them to elaborate on why they think it is important to remember, one of the students stated, "So that it doesn't happen again. So that we don't make the same mistakes." To which his schoolmate explained further:

> When it's not discussed in facts, and on the level where we actually rely on facts and reason, politicians bring it up as a tool of their ideology and distort those facts. And that's when the problem is that it's not discussed because then it's easier to believe something that one makes up, since we don't have information about how it really is.

This worry concerning the lack of knowledge that would enable the young generation to judge the truthfulness of the presented information also resonated with the older generations. On one hand they did not feel the need (or possibly the necessary level of erudition) to talk about the past, but at the same time they argued that it needs to be remembered.

"It's history. It should be known – it should not be forgotten," a middle-aged woman stated, and a man sitting close to her added, in agreement with her, "[p]erhaps all the more so because it could happen again at any time. This nation hasn't changed. The people have not changed. And the mindset is still the same." After a moment, he noted, "[m]any European nations are susceptible to succumbing to propaganda. So, we must always remind ourselves of such things," and she added, "[a]nd the consequences."

Reflecting on the issues of memory and the fear of forgetting, one of our oldest informants argued, "[t]his cannot be disputed. It happened. And the young ones must be reminded of those atrocities. What was done. The truth. War is a terrible thing that shouldn't happen," and after a moment he added, "[o]ne is horrified that in Ukraine now, in the 21st century, such a thing could happen. One cannot understand that."

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the state of memory about the Holocaust in Slovakia. Our findings show that the communist regime intentionally worked on forgetting about the Holocaust. This heritage did not mean the denial of fascist atrocities per se but the effect was the ambivalence about the roots and causes of the Holocaust and the lack of public pedagogy about the fragile nature of peace among different social and cultural groups. The problem then is the inability on the significant part of a public to recognise the symptoms and manipulations with the past aiming to undermine liberal democracy and especially the existing memory consensus

legitimising this democracy. This lack of awareness about the ambivalence has been most visible in the unquestioned difference between the public statements dismissing the Holocaust and private commemorations of it.

The parallel existence under the late Soviet system – the official and the private that contradicted but also complemented each other – was well explained by Alexei Yurchak (2005). Today, followers of alternative (often latently antisemitic views) think democracy is only a facade; there is no real democracy, only the democratic ideology of the elites, just as there was the communist ideology of the communist powerholders. This is not simple nostalgia for the wartime Slovak Republic or state socialism that either perpetrated or tended to forget about the Holocaust: instead, it is a much more powerful and complex revisionism of history that needs more thorough and efficient public reflection and pedagogy. The requisite political will, however, is needed for both.

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