A Jewish Renaissance? Reflections on Jewish Life in East Central Europe since 1989

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November 9, 1989. I remember exactly where I was on that day. It was one of those rare occasions that everyone recognized as a world-historical event, not after it had already played out, but while it is actually happening. It may not have been the "end of history," but it was certainly a turning point, not only for the former Eastern Bloc—a term that is seldom heard today—but also for my own intellectual development. Until then, I had been studying Egyptology and Old World Archaeology and Art at a college in the United States, but the events of 1989 propelled me three thousand years ahead, as I started taking courses in Modern European History with a particular focus on the history of Eastern Europe. In 1992, after graduating from college, I traveled to Czechoslovakia to teach English in a small Slovak coal-mining town, where I was welcomed as a major curiosity and a minor celebrity, based solely on my American citizenship and my native English. Before my departure, I made sure to visit Schoenhof's Foreign Books, which still had a brick-and-mortar shop in Harvard Square, and there, I purchased the recently-published *Beginning Slovak: A Course for the Individual or Classroom Learner.*[1] Then, I visited a larger bookstore chain and purchased Charles Hoffman's *Gray Dawn: The Jews of Eastern Europe in the Post-Communist Era*, which was fresh off the press.[2] Keep in mind that at the time, the "post-communist era" was less than three years old.

While preparing to write this article, I thought it would be interesting to open *Gray Dawn* and read it again three decades later. Its author, the late Charles Hoffman, was a "feared and respected" Israeli-American journalist who had left journalism to work for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee ("the Joint").[3] In this latter capacity, he visited six countries in Eastern Europe between May 1989 and November 1990 and reported on their

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1 O.E. Swan, S. Gálová-Lorinc, *Beginning Slovak: A Course for the Individual or Classroom Learner* (Pittsburgh, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1990).

2 C. Hoffman, *Gray Dawn: The Jews of* Eastern *Europe in the Post-Communist Era* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Collins, 1992).

3 "Charles Hoffman Dies," *The Washington Post*, August 5, 2000.

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Jewish communities. Two of these countries—Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic ("East Germany")—no longer exist, and Hoffman was fully convinced that many of these Jewish communities that he visited would meet the same fate. He titled his book *Gray Dawn* because his optimism about the future was quite restrained. "[I]t was a new day … for all the Jews of Eastern Europe," he wrote. "But, like the gray dawn hovering over the Carpathians, it was filled with foreboding as well as hope."[4]

In the introduction, Hoffman described the situation as follows:

> Now, with the fall of Communism, there were signs of a Jewish awakening all over Eastern Europe. Were these simply the last sparks of dying embers, or could the Jews of Eastern Europe summon the collective will to ignite the flame of self-renewal? The small Jewish population in most of these communities and the formidable obstacles to regeneration did not give much cause for optimism. Perhaps for the Jews the liberation from Communism had come several decades too late.[5]

Hoffman's pessimism, or rather, his muted optimism, can be explained, above all, by basic demography. According to estimates of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe in 1989, there were 4,100 Jews in Poland, 7,900 in Czechoslovakia, 19,000 in Romania, and to the surprise of many, 58,000 Jews in Hungary.[6] These Jews were not the remnants of once thriving and glorious communities, but rather the remnants of a remnant. Many of them were elderly Jews with non-Jewish spouses who had survived the Shoah and remained behind the Iron Curtain that had descended across the continent.

They did not emigrate in the immediate post-war period, sometimes for family reasons, sometimes for health reasons, and sometimes because they wanted to take part in building a more just society. They did not join the smaller waves of emigration in the 1950s and 1960s; they remained after Soviet troops crushed the Hungarian Revolution of 1956; they remained after the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia and crushed the Prague Spring in 1968; they remained after Poland's anti-Zionist campaign in 1968. And they were not among the approximately 40,000 Romanian Jews who were allowed to emigrate to Israel between 1968 and 1989 in exchange for a hefty "ransom" paid by the State of Israel and international Jewish organizations.[7]

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4 Hoffman, *Gray Dawn*, 4.

5 Idem.

6 U.O. Schmelz and S. DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 1989," *American Jewish Yearbook* 91 (1991): 456.

7 R. Ioanid, *The Ransom of the Jews: The Story of the Extraordinary Secret Bargain between Romania and Israel* (Chicago, Ill.: Ivan R. Dee, 2005).

Before the fall of Communism, no one really considered the possibility of a Jewish *future* in Eastern Europe. In 1988, the photographer Edward Serotta traveled behind the Iron Curtain in order to "witness the last days of Jewish life in the region." He planned to gather material for a book, which was tentatively titled *The Last Autumn: The Last Jews of Eastern Europe*, but he encountered a problem. As he put it: "No one wanted to be the last Jew."[8] Three years later, Serotta's book appeared, but under a totally different title: *Out of the Shadows: A Photographic Portrait of Jewish Life in Central Europe Since the Holocaust.*[9] Instead of documenting Jewish communities teetering on the verge of extinction, he photographed Jewish kindergartens, Jewish summer camps, Jewish schools, and Jewish balls. These were certainly not evidence of a dying community harboring no hope for the future. "Since when do the last Jews go to summer camp?" Serotta asked rhetorically.

After the fall of Communism, Jewish visitors streamed to East-Central Europe and experienced a kind of cognitive dissonance. They expected cemeteries, concentration camps, abandoned and neglected synagogues, and perhaps a few "leftover" elderly Jews, but not much more. A few years later, Konstantin Gebert, at the time a 36-year-old Polish Jew, observed their genuine surprise when they met real-life Jews. As he put it: "They just can't imagine that in Poland, we actually exist."[10] Gradually, people started speaking about an "unexpected rebirth" in Poland, a "rebirth of Jewish life in both parts of the former Czechoslovakia," a "renaissance of Hungarian Jewry."[11] The historian Diana Pinto described the situation in the following words: "Communities believed to be dead came back to life, even if the number of members did not even come close to the number before the Holocaust."[12]

Renaissance. Rebirth. Resurrection. These words were conjured up with great enthusiasm, but the raw numbers painted a more sobering, even pessimistic, picture. Indeed, demography is destiny. Can one imagine a full-fledged

8 E. Serotta, "Die letzten Juden Osteuropas haben gerade Nachwuchs bekommen," in *Jüdische Gemeinden in Europa: Zwischen Aufbruch und Kontinuität*, ed. B. Ungar-Klein (Vienna: Picus, 2000), 94–97. In 1986, the photographer Yale Strom published a book entitled *The Last Jews of Eastern Europe* (New York, N.Y.: Philosophical Library, 1986).

9 E. Serotta, *Out of the Shadows: A Photographic Portrait of Jewish Life in Central Europe since the Holocaust* (New York, N.Y.: Birch Lande Press, 1991).

10 K. Gebert, "Eine unerwartete Wiedergeburt—Judentum in Polen," in *Jüdische Gemeinden*, ed. Ungar-Klein, 145.

11 Ibid., 136–46; J. Lion, "Prag und Bratislava—neuerwachte jüdische Gemeinden," in *Jüdische Gemeinden*, ed. Ungar-Klein, 147–154; E. Lazarovits, "Das ungarische Judentum in der Zeit von 1945 bis 1999," in *Jüdische Gemeinden*, ed. Ungar-Klein, 160–70.

12 D. Pinto, "Von jüdischen Gemeinden in Europa zu europäischen jüdischen Gemeinden," in *Jüdische Gemeinden*, ed. Ungar-Klein, 183.

rebirth without a critical mass of Jews? Charles Hoffman certainly could not. He looked into the future and saw more gray than dawn. In the best case scenario the small Jewish communities, but also the large Jewish community of Budapest, would survive as "caretaker communities." A small number of Jews, half-Jews and non-Jews would serve as custodians of their country's Jewish heritage and take responsibility for the upkeep of synagogues, cemeteries and other Jewish sites, not for the sake of the local Jews, but rather for the sake of Jews from Israel and the West (and, of course, for the benefit of domestic tourism).[13]

Interestingly, Hoffman, Pinto and other observers worried about another threat: the colonization of the "newly awakened" Jewish communities by Jews from Israel and North America. No one was afraid of actual physical colonization. No one imaged American and Israeli Jews settling *en masse* in East-Central Europe. They feared an ideological or religious colonization that would brush aside the distinctive Jewish customs and lifeways that had emerged under Communism (or in its aftermath); they feared that forty years of Communism would be denigrated and dismissed as a meaningless detour or a distorted aberration that had contributed nothing of lasting importance. Israelis and North American Jews would try to "save" the younger generation by importing Zionism and Orthodoxy as the only legitimate expressions of Jewishness. Israeli and North American Jews might try to "redeem" the younger generation by removing them from the region and resettling them in Israel, Western Europe or North America.

These fears also pertained to the cultural and material heritage of East-Central European Jewry. For example, in the early 1990s, the National Library of Israel wanted to send librarians to Hungary to help catalogue the famous library of the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest. In return, the National Library of Israel asked for copies of any duplicate books that the library in Jerusalem did not have in its own collection. The response to this offer (as reported by a friend) was: "These books survived the Holocaust and Communism, and now the National Library of Israel wants to take our heritage away from us." The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, which holds the archives of hundreds of former Jewish communities, also wanted to bring the Hungarian Jewish Archives to Jerusalem as a way of rescuing or redeeming Hungary's Jewish heritage. The message was loud and clear: the Jewish past and the Jewish future belong to (and belong in) Israel, not Hungary.

But what about the situation in East-Central Europe today? To answer this question, we must first grapple with two perennial questions: Who is a Jew?

13 Hoffman, *Gray Dawn*, 319.

What is Judaism? There are no unequivocal answers to these questions, but in order to understand the situation in East-Central Europe, we must examine the ways in which the Jewish communities themselves grapple with these questions and their real-life consequences.

Who is a Jew? For decades, Jewish demographers have been trying to define the main object of their research. Sergio DellaPergola, an Italian-born demographer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, employs three different categories to describe the Jewish population of a given country.[14]

1. *Core Jewish Population* includes all persons who, when asked in a sociodemographic survey, identify themselves as Jews; *or* who are identified as Jews by a respondent in the same household, *and* do not have another monotheistic religion.
2. *Enlarged Jewish Population* includes the sum of: (a) the *core* Jewish population; (b) persons reporting they are *partly Jewish*; (c) all others of Jewish parentage who—by *core* Jewish population criteria—are not currently Jewish (non-Jews with Jewish background); and (d) all respective non-Jewish household members (spouses, children, etc.)
3. *Israel's Law of Return* defines a Jew as any person born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism (regardless of denomination—Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Reform), who does not have another religious identity.

These categories are based on a mixture of various criteria—biological descent, ancestry, religion, self-ascription and external ascription. Until recently, these three categories all had one thing in common: none of them were used by the official Jewish communities in East Central Europe. Prior to 2013, only *halakhic* Jews could be admitted as members of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic, and this is still the case with regard to the Jewish community of Prague. Prior to 1997, only *halakhic* Jews could be admitted as members of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland. And to this day, the Federation of Jewish Communities in Slovakia only admits *halakhic* Jews, and this is the case in Hungary, too, where there are three umbrella organizations: Neolog, Orthodox and Chabad-Lubavitch. In the Autonomous Orthodox Jewish Community of Hungary (MAOIH), only men have the right to vote.

A *halakhic* Jew is someone who has a Jewish mother or has undergone an Orthodox conversion. In East-Central Europe, *halakhic* Jews are a dying breed. And this is one of the reasons why a number of communities have expanded membership criteria in recent years. In Poland and the Czech Republic (except

14 S. DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population 2014," *American Jewish Yearbook* 114 (2014): 307–09.

for Prague), the membership criteria are more or less identical to those set out in Israel's Law of Return.

When Charles Hoffman spoke of Zionist "colonization," he certainly was not thinking of the implantation and dissemination of a more inclusive definition of Jewishness in the region. But, to a certain extent, this is exactly what has happened. And the wider, more inclusive definition of Jewishness has also had an impact on the definition of Judaism.

Now, to the second question: What is Judaism? Since the nineteenth century, Jewish scholars have tried to define the "essence of Judaism" (*das Wesen des Judentums*). Is belief the essence of Judaism? Religious practice? Racial belonging? National belonging? Ethnic belonging? Today, this is a question that does not only interest scholars of Judaism, but also the many thousands of Jews (and descendants of Jews) who feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish past, present or future. The results of a recent sociological survey in Hungary reveal that 95 percent of the respondents identify as Jews according to descent, but only 46 percent as Jews according to belief.[15] They are not three-day Jews, i.e., Jews who attend synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or even two-day Jews or one-day Jews. They are what I would call "no-day Jews," namely, Jews who never set foot inside a synagogue.

The Shoah is the strongest pillar of Hungarian Jewish identity. Three-fourths of the respondents have a strong emotional connection to Israel, and 81 percent consider Jews to be a recognizable group.[16] For the majority, Judaism does not constitute a religious community, but rather a community of fate. The official Jewish communities in Hungary are religious communities (or congregations) that can hardly represent the interests of the "enlarged Jewish population." Not surprisingly, when a small group of Hungarian Jews spearheaded a campaign in 1990 to have Jews recognized as an official *national* minority (alongside Germans, Romanians, Slovaks, Roma, etc.), their efforts fell on deaf ears. Eighteen years ago, the question of who is a Jew divided the Prague Jewish community so profoundly that the chairman of the community fired the strictly Orthodox rabbi because he did not recognize the majority of Prague's Jews as Jews. Afterwards, the chairman himself was fired, and he barricaded himself in his office and refused to relinquish his post.[17] It is no wonder that

15 Cf. A. Kovács and I. Barna, eds., *Zsidók és zsidóság Magyarországon 2017-ben: Egy szociológiai kutatás eredményei* [*Jews and Judaism in Hungary in 2017: Results from a Sociological Survey*] (Budapest: Szombat, 2018), 213.

16 Ibid., 218–21.

17 Cf. B. Kenety, "Stand-Off Continues over Prague Jewish Community Head Posting," *Radio Praha*, December 20, 2004, https://www.radio.cz/en/section/curraffrs/stand-off-continues-over-prague-jewish-community-head-posting.

there are so many "no-day Jews" in Prague, Budapest, Bratislava and Warsaw. Indeed, it is no surprise that the modest, Jewish renaissance in these cities has taken place primarily *outside* the confines of the religious communities.

For decades, mistrust of the "official" Jewish institutions—due to collaboration with the Communist regimes, due to the stuffy, uninviting atmosphere, or due to rampant corruption—led people to search, discover and develop their Jewish identities in alternative spaces. Without the internet, without connections to Jewish communities in Western Europe, North America and Israel, and often without the participation, support or knowledge of parents, many Jews cobbled together their own Jewish identities during the Communist era. Konstantin Gebert refers to these as "homemade" Jewish identities.[18] Usually, the emphasis was placed on culture and literature, food and history, and the search for roots. These Jewish identities were not deeply rooted. How could they be, when many individuals—perhaps even the majority—first discovered their Jewish ancestry when they were already teenagers or young adults?

This drive toward discovery and self-discovery continues to this day and typifies the activities of the Jews, half-Jews, quarter-Jews, and non-Jews who send their children to Jewish kindergartens, organize Jewish cultural festivals in Krakow, Budapest, Třebíč, Szeged, Kiskunhalas and many other places and established Jewish community centers in Budapest, Krakow and Warsaw. They set up new Jewish NGOs, perform in Jewish theater troupes or musical groups in Bucharest, Budapest, Bratislava and Warsaw, publish Jewish books and journals, study Jewish Studies at universities in Budapest, Szeged, Prague, Pilsen, Olomouc, Bucharest, Cluj, Warsaw, Krakow and Wroclaw. In addition, they take care of the upkeep of abandoned cemeteries and synagogues and cultivate relations with relatives and kindred spirits in Western Europe, Israel, Australia, North America and South America.

This Jewish renaissance is characterized by its flexibility, versatility, agility and, above all, its interconnectedness. Budapest is an important node, because there are so many Jews among its inhabitants—as many as five percent of the city's total population according to the most all-encompassing definition of a Jew. But Budapest is just one node in a highly ramified network. What the Jews of East Central Europe have learned—and perhaps can even teach others—is that interdependence, reciprocity, mobility and a bit of humility may not always be enough to resuscitate communities that have been left for dead, but are certainly enough to reenter the global Jewish community, or even a global, transnational community. Not surprisingly, one-third of Hungarian Jewish

18 Gebert, "Ein unerwartete Wiedergeburt," 141.

respondents identified themselves, first and foremost, not as Hungarians or as Jews, but as Europeans.[19]

Jewish tourists visit East-Central Europe in ever-growing numbers, and they still expect to see cemeteries, concentration camps, abandoned and neglected synagogues, and perhaps a few "leftover" elderly Jews. They come to see the Jewish past, but perhaps they are actually looking at the Jewish future. In Western Europe, North America and South America, the non-Orthodox Jewish population is declining rapidly, and as intermarriage rates increase and synagogue membership decreases, these Jewish communities are gradually coming to resemble, in many respects, the communities in East-Central Europe. Who knows? Perhaps the feared "colonizers" from the West actually have something to learn from the recent experiences of their fellow Jews in East-Central Europe.

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19 Cf. Kovács and Barna, eds., *Zsidók és zsidóság Magyarországon*, 215.

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