

GROWING UP JEWISH IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Alena Heitlinger

Introduction

IN 2002, a Slovak-Swiss Jewish respondent, whom I had approached for my survey, commented that in October 2001 she had visited the Jewish Museum in Bratislava and added:¹

The history of Jews on display ended with the Holocaust. When I asked why no information is provided about Jewish life after the war — since I grew up in Bratislava when there was a Jewish sort of life of sorts then — they looked at me as if I fell from the moon. So it's great that somebody is now researching this subject.

In this article, I use the Hebrew word *Shoah* to refer to what is popularly termed 'Holocaust' of Jewry during the Second World War.

The principal aim of this paper is to analyze processes of identity-formation among the generation of Czech and Slovak Jews who were born to *Shoah* survivors — the so-called 'second generation', who grew up under the post-war communist system. The focus is on inter- and intra-generational differences, and on socio-political circumstances which have shaped an individual's consciousness and identity as a Jew, a Czech, a Slovak, or a Czechoslovak and, where relevant, as an émigré or an immigrant.

A member of a specific birth cohort or generation has a unique set of life choices and opportunities. As each cohort ages, it faces a different set of historical forces, which may entail comparative advantages or disadvantages in life chances. Birth cohorts are most sharply differentiated during periods of accelerated change. Traumatic episodes and experiences (such as ethnic genocide, war, foreign occupation) may crystallize a distinct mentality or a specific cohort, or self-identified generation.² Since there are structured variations in exposure to (and interpretation of) specific historical conditions and events — by social class, gender, locality, ethnicity, and kinship relations — it is essential that an analysis of whole cohorts and generations be complemented by an analysis of life course variation *within* cohorts and generations.³ The

The Jewish Journal of Sociology, vol. 46, nos. 1 and 2, 2004

ALENA HEITLINGER

present analysis relates both to those who remained in Czechoslovakia and those who emigrated after the Soviet invasion of August 1968.

Methods, Data, and Sources

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from seven main data sources: a) 195 semi-structured autobiographical replies to questionnaires which were returned to me during May-September 2002 from snow-ball sampling of 420 Czech and Slovak Jews of the 'second' generation currently living in the Czech and Slovak Republics, various countries in Western Europe, Canada, Australia, the U.S., and Israel; b) five focus group discussions with Czech and Slovak Jews of the post-war generation, which I conducted in 2002 and 2003 in Geneva, Prague, Toronto, London, and Bratislava; c) 15 interview transcripts of daughters of Czech women survivors taped in 2001 and 2002, kindly made available to me by Ms. Pavla Frýdlová, the director of the Prague-based Gender Studies-sponsored research project called 'Women's Memory — Victims of the Holocaust'; d) correspondence with some key participants in Czech and Slovak Jewish youth groups from the 1960s; e) a ten-page confidential report on Czech Jewish youth activism that my late father Ota Heitlinger submitted to the Czech Ministry of Education and Culture on 21 June 1965 in support of his request to hold educational meetings for Jewish youth at the Prague Jewish town hall (from 1961 to 1974 he was the secretary-general of both the Council of Czech Jewish Religious Communities and the Prague Jewish Religious Community); and f) secondary data from existing comparative studies, websites, and personal memoirs, including data from the Slovak/Czech Jewish website www.chaverim.sk. Last but not least, I have also relied on my personal experiences as a Prague-born Czech Jew of the 'second generation', as a member of a Prague-based Jewish youth group from the 1960s, now called '*Děti Maislovky*' ('Children of Maisel Street'),⁴ and as an August 1968 emigrant to the U.K. and (in 1975) to Canada.

Historical Background

The main historical circumstances facing Czech and Slovak Jews after the Second World War were the memory of *Shoah*, the state socialist/communist transformation initiated by the communist coup in February 1948, and the creation of the State of Israel. After the Second World War, Czech and Slovak politicians sought to build a nation-state of Czechs and Slovaks, which would be ethnically monolithic. To this end, most of the ethnic Germans and ethnic Magyars were deported, and the remnants of Jewry were allowed to emigrate.⁵ With 22,000–24,000 Jews, half of all Czechoslovak *Shoah* survivors, emigrating in 1945–50 to Israel, and an additional 3,000–5,000 going elsewhere, this left behind only 15,000–

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

18,000 Czech and Slovak Jews, less than one tenth of the pre-war figure.⁶ Only nine of 153 pre-war Czech Jewish communities were re-established, and most were very small. The largest was in Prague, with approximately 2,500–3,000 members, many of whom were internal migrants from other parts of Czechoslovakia.

In Slovak cities, towns, and villages 43 Jewish communities were re-established; but most of them were very small and, like their Czech counterparts, had difficulty in forming a *minyan* — which requires a quorum of ten adult males for public prayer. However, several of the Slovak Jewish communities were sufficiently large to exhibit a 'normal'⁷ religious life with a rabbi; a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer of meat and poultry for human consumption); a *heder* (an elementary religious school); and a *hevera kadisha* (a burial society). However, that normal Jewish life apparently did not last long: archival sources from the Union of Slovak Jewish Religious Communities cited in Salner⁸ suggest that there was a steep decline by the late 1950s. The decline in religiosity was accelerated in the 1960s by two waves of migration: legal migration to Israel in the mid-1960s and after the August 1968 Soviet invasion, a large scale migration to many countries across the globe. As older members started dying off, many Slovak communities could not be sustained: there were only 15 in 1990 and by 2000 only 11 were functioning Jewish religious communities.

Obviously, the parental generation of *Shoah* survivors (the so-called 'first' generation) experienced the war, the years immediately following the war, and the Stalinist period of communism differently from their children — the 'second' generation. The Czech and Slovak Jews who were born after the Second World War had no direct experience of concentration camps, gas chambers, or slaughter of Jews by Nazis or Nazi-sympathisers and they were too young to feel the full impact of Stalinist purges and the antisemitism evident in the communist show trials of the early 1950s. Most members of the post-war generation came of age during the de-Stalinization period of 1962–68. As I have argued elsewhere, 'in contrast with other communist countries, the Czech/Slovak Jewish community has been shaped not just by the Holocaust and by Stalinism at large, but also by the very specific experiences of de-Stalinization which eventually led to the 'Prague Spring' of 1968. There is no direct counterpart to this experience in other parts of East-Central Europe'.⁹

The opening of the Cold War borders and the communist-initiated processes of re-evaluation of official policies towards organized religion and towards youth were of particular significance to the post-war generation of Czech/Slovak Jews. The de-Stalinization process also made individual travel much easier, including visits and even emigration to Israel. However, the re-imposition of communist orthodoxy after 1969 meant that the benefits of the reform policies were not equally distributed across the

various birth cohorts. Depending on whether the young people came of age before or after the August 1968 Soviet invasion, and whether they remained or emigrated, individuals belonging to birth cohorts separated by only a few years found themselves in radically different conditions from which to conceive and renegotiate their Czech/Slovak Jewish identities. Thus like the parental generation, the 'second' generation is a heterogeneous group of people differentiated by year of birth, gender, language, cultural background, family politics, and geography.

The Demographic and Social Characteristics of the Parental Generation

Those born between the 1890s and 1930s belong to the 'first' generation of *Shoah* survivors and constitute more than 40 birth cohorts. If it were not for the war massacres, they would have belonged to two, or even three, separate generations. Many Jewish parents of children born in the aftermath of the war were older as a result of the circumstances of the war. In some cases, survivors had lost their children during the War and their post-war children belonged to their second families of procreation. Typical demographic characteristics of these families were a significant age gap between spouses; small family size (one or two children); and a lack of extended family members — since most relatives had either perished in the *Shoah* or were living abroad.

Most Slovak survivors married each other. Of the 79 self-identified Slovak Jews who completed my questionnaire, only five were of mixed parentage. However, among the 116 self-identified Czech Jews in the sample, 19 (16 per cent) had only a Jewish father (and in two of these cases, the father was himself the child of a mixed marriage) and the same number had only a Jewish mother — with five of these mothers born of mixed marriages. There were 74 respondents (64 per cent of the sample) with both Jewish parents, but in five cases these parents had a mother or a father or both parents who were the product of mixed marriages. Out-marriage among Czech Jews was already prevalent before the Second World War. Ruth Gruber has noted that it 'was endemic (by the 1930s, about one-quarter of all Bohemian Jews married out of the Faith)'.¹⁰

In the post-war period, since many of the Jews who married other Jews tried to conceal their Jewishness, that endogamous selection of partners was more linked to the horror of their shared wartime experiences than with the traditional taboo against taking a Gentile spouse. Those who did marry a non-Jew often selected a strongly anti-fascist and/or philosemitic partner who had shown an earlier interest in Jewish history, culture, and personalities. One of the Prague-born female respondents stated:

My mother is from a well-known musical family in Prague. She studied piano with Professor Kraus, and her circle included Gideon Klein. The majority of

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

her friends were Jews. She met my father in 1939 ... The murder of most of her musical friends made a huge impact on her.

Another Prague respondent commented about her non-Jewish father: 'After my mother passed away, it was as if he took over her Jewishness — great philosemite. He is very interested in the political situation in Israel'. Moreover, those born of mixed marriages accounted for a higher proportion of survivors: they had been the last ones to be deported and because of their stronger ties to the non-Jewish environment, they had also been less likely to emigrate after the war.

Many of the parents who were members of the 'first' generation had been traumatised by the *Shoah* and their physical and mental health had been impaired. They suffered depressions, various anxieties, migraines, were suspicious of strangers, and also had distrust and fear of authorities. They felt guilty because they had survived, and often exhibited cynicism, bitterness, and low self-esteem. They had profound ambivalence about their Jewishness — ranging from complete distancing and denial to full identification. They were devoted utterly (and according to some, excessively) to their children and family life in general and were most concerned about the education of their children. The terrifying wartime experiences strengthened their atheistic leanings (an attitude already prevalent among Czech Jews before the war) and their support for Zionism — on the grounds that it was the only possible way to escape antisemitism. They also favoured cultural and national assimilation (for those who did not emigrate), and espousing of socialism or communism.

Czech and Slovak Jews (unlike their Gentile compatriots) of the 'first' generation were frequently multilingual¹¹ and sometimes introduced foreign words into their country's vocabulary.¹² They also had a different sense of humour, regularly listened to foreign broadcasts, and discussed politics at home.¹³ Many did not drink beer (a Czech national beverage); ate slightly different food at home; only half-heartedly celebrated mainstream holidays such as Christmas;¹⁴ and for the most part had as close friends other Jews. By their early teens, most Jewish children recognized that they were 'different', that their parents were concealing or were ambivalent about something important, and that, as one respondent put it during a focus group discussion, 'something isn't right'. The discovery of their Jewish identity was sometimes a traumatic experience, as Jewish descent was a stigmatized identity. As Salner¹⁵ has argued, in Slovak (and Czech) culture 'Jewish origin was commonly viewed akin to an illness, which the "afflicted" person must regard as a grave misfortune'. However, learning about one's Jewish heritage was for many also quite liberating, as it (finally!) could explain what until then was experienced as a puzzling sense of otherness.

ALENA HEITLINGER

Attitudes to Communism

Orientation towards communism is the most significant boundary which divides the 'first' from the 'second' generation. There were, of course, many anti-communists among the 'first' generation¹⁶, but a disproportionate number were supportive of the communist ideal. The leading communist activist Eduard Goldstücker¹⁷, who was an assimilated Slovak Jew, commented in his memoirs that the unquestioned faith which many members of the 'first' generation had in the Bolshevik Revolution and in communism is hard for subsequent generations to understand:¹⁸

Many of us heard the voice of the Russian revolution. It proclaimed brotherly solidarity of all, and liberation from poverty, backwardness and mutual antipathy. This program created an enormous wave of trust, which was depleted only after a huge number of bitter disappointments, and by Stalin's cruel rule. And, strictly speaking, not even these have completely spent this trust. The force of this almost magic attraction is unexplainable and incomprehensible for young people today. Even to me, when I am putting these words on paper, it seems as if this whole episode was not lived by me, but by someone else.

Many of the *Shoah* survivors were supportive of communism out of gratitude to the Soviet army for defeating German fascism, and for liberating them from Auschwitz and the Czech Nazi Jewish ghetto and concentration camp of Terezín/Theresienstadt. As one female respondent recalled, her mother was 'a Communist Party member since 1945, after the Red army saved her life and took her in as a 25-years-old widow'. Another noted that her mother 'was basically not against communism. There was always the fact that she was liberated from Terezín by the Soviet army'. Other *Shoah* survivors supported communism out of hope that it would solve once and for all the problems of antisemitism, poverty, and social injustice. One Slovak respondent stated: 'My mother from the beginning regarded the communist movement as the only safeguard for social justice and non-recurrence of the *Shoah*. In her view, antisemitism would become extinct only in a communist society. She was mistaken in her belief, as were so many other people'. A similar explanation is offered by other respondents. One left-leaning father 'looked to communist ideas already in the concentration camp', while another 'believed that communism would improve the world and create life without violence. He wanted to build a new society to forget that the majority of his relatives did not return from concentration camps, and to forget the trauma that his mother perished in Auschwitz'. Yet another father 'identified with communism, believed in Soviet policy, believed that if it were not for the liberation by the USSR, all Jews in Europe would have been completely exterminated. (It is worth noting that none of his immediate relatives survived the war.)'

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Most of those who embraced socialism/communism out of their desire 'to change the world' became profoundly disillusioned. The first 'awakening' typically occurred during the antisemitic show trials in the early 1950s, while for others it was only in August 1968 or even November 1989 that they lost their faith:

After the war my mother worked in the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CCP). She lost her job after the Slánský showtrial [in the early 1950s]. She was cured from the communist worldview only gradually, and left communism completely behind only after 1968. She is one of the few of convinced communists of her generation who fully acknowledged her errors, and who warned others about the fanaticism to which she herself had once adhered.

Another respondent stated:¹⁹

Did my mother change her positive view of communism? Only somebody who did not have parents who were Jewish communists can ask such a question. After the war, 90 per cent of Jews believed that the Russians, who had saved them from the concentration camps, would never allow such antisemitism. That is why those who were employed in jobs requiring a party card had no problem in joining the CCP. They were then ordinary rank and file members who could not leave the party because it would have meant destroying the future of their children. The remaining 10 per cent were genuine communists who believed in that ideology and who were in leading positions. In any case, many of those ended on the chopping block or in a camp.

One respondent said that his father was a communist and added: 'After the Slánský trials he became disillusioned. He devoted himself to medical service in the northern borderland until his premature death'. Another father's 'belief in communism collapsed only after 1989, despite the fact that he was expelled from the CCP during the show trials in the 1950s and rehabilitated in the 60s'. Yet another father 'sympathized with the communists already in the exile army and it is possible that he also cooperated with them. He joined the party in 1945 after his return to Czechoslovakia. He was active in various positions at the level of the basic party unit. He declined the offer of a position of a working class company director. He was expelled from the party after 1968'.

The 'magic attraction' (and consequent disillusionment) of socialism and communism felt by Goldstücker and so many others of his generation was not, and could not have been, passed on to the next generation. For the post-war cohorts, socialism/communism was a given, taken-for-granted socio-economic political system into which they were born, under which they grew up, and which some escaped by emigrating. Those who remained adapted to it as best as they could, along the same pragmatic lines as their non-Jewish peers.

Attitudes to Judaism

Religion was both an intra- and an inter-generational dividing line. As noted above, several sizeable Slovak Jewish communities re-established their 'normal' religious life after the Second World War. Pavel Traubman (who was born in 1940) commented that post-war intergenerational transmission of Jewish traditions and values was comparatively easy in observant families in those areas: they adhered to *kashrut*, lit candles on the Sabbath, and regularly attended synagogue.²⁰

My grandfather made sure, together with my parents, that I had a *bar mitzvah*. Because of lack of a *minyan* in Ilava, I had my *bar mitzvah* in Bratislava. As a young boy, I learned to read Hebrew letters . . . We kept the traditions, we had Passover matzos, for many years we had separate meat and milk dishes, but later on we abandoned that.

Children who grew up in such families always knew that they were Jewish and took it in their stride. Since they often had classmates with a similar background, they did not feel completely isolated.²¹ This does not mean, however, that they did not feel singled out. The religious observance experienced at home was always in opposition to what they learned in secular schools, where teachers taught from a centralized nationwide curriculum, and promoted atheism and other communist values. Moreover, as Salner²² notes, 'in the school curriculum the word Jews was not used, not even in connection with the Holocaust . . . The state of Israel also appeared in official speeches only in negative connotations'.

Religious parents who joined the communist party exhibited conflicting attitudes towards Judaism and that puzzled their children. One Slovak respondent found his father's religiosity hard to comprehend. He was a 10-year-old who saw his father attend a communist party meeting in the afternoon and then go at dusk to take part in a religious service in a makeshift synagogue. (The Bolsheviks had demolished the existing synagogue and built a bus station in its place.) On another day at noon he would attend another communist meeting and later 'in the afternoon he tried to save with his bare hands a half-destroyed Jewish cemetery, which was being demolished by the same Bolsheviks, with whom he was at noon in a meeting'.

Other parents, fearful that open religious observance could present career difficulties both for themselves and for their children, observed Jewish rituals only secretly. During a focus group discussion, a Slovak respondent from a small town recalled a childhood experience, when he came unexpectedly early home from school to find his father covered in what he later understood to have been a *tallit* (a prayer shawl) while reciting in Hebrew. His father quickly ended what he was doing and refused to explain what had taken place. In another focus group discussion, a Czech female participant recalled her puzzlement when she

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

was a child and watched her mother touch the doorpost of their apartment every time they left home. The mother never explained anything about an imaginary *mezuzah*; they had none, since it would have been an obvious sign of a Jewish identity — which this particular mother was trying to conceal.

However, the majority of Czech Jews of the 'first' generation were atheists or agnostics. Their secular outlook was a reflection of trends before the Second World War, their wartime experiences, and the high degree of secularization of Czech culture. There was also no religious observance among the 'second' generation, especially in Prague. Under the heading 'What is Jewish among this Youth?' O. Heitlinger²³ noted in his report:

Youth of the Prague Jewish Religious Community have no religion. Only very few boys have had a *barmitzvah*. Others encountered religion only during chance visits to the synagogue with their parents. Many have never set foot in a synagogue... No young person regularly attends Prague religious services.

Some members of the 'second' generation became interested in Judaism after 1968 but, for the vast majority of Czech and Slovak Jews of the post-war generation, Judaism has failed to evoke the same strong emotions which were aroused by references to the *Shoah* or to communism.

Parental Strategies of Concealment of Jewishness

The impacts of *Shoah* and state socialism/communism on the 'first' generation were also manifested in its strong desire to assimilate. The *Shoah* survivors who did not emigrate typically regarded themselves as belonging to the Czech or Slovak nation, with the result that they tended to raise their children to be culturally Czech or Slovak. As a rule, there was little if any reference to Jewish cultural and religious traditions and in many cases there was also total silence about the *Shoah*. The ambivalent or negative attitudes towards Jewishness can be largely attributed to traumas from the *Shoah*, and to the reinforcement of these traumas by new fears and traumas generated by Stalinism and its antisemitism in the 1950s. Thus, as O. Heitlinger²⁴ suggested in his report, some of the parents 'simply did not want their children to be Jewish, when they themselves were unable, or possibly did not want to, escape this fateful burden'. The survivors were devoted parents who often saw in assimilation the best strategy for protecting their children: ensuring that they would not be singled out as 'different' and thus marginalized in Czech and Slovak schools

The degrees of concealment varied, of course, ranging from complete denial of a Jewish heritage to partial or full identification. Some parents incorporated discussion about a variety of Jewish topics into everyday life without feeling the need to 'explain' the meaning of Jewishness, while others stressed the necessity to keep such discussions within the family

ALENA HEITLINGER

circle. Some parents left the 'explanation' of Jewish origin to other relatives or to strategically placed 'clues' in the form of books or misplaced personal documents:

We simply always knew that we are Jews, even if we did not live a religious life. No 'explanation' took place, but conversations did. My parents discussed with me Jewish themes as a matter of course.

I think he talked about it neutrally — a person is not ashamed of his origin, but neither does he boast about it. It is something which is kept among a narrow trusted circle of friends.

Both parents, but especially my father, since my childhood stressed in a positive way leading Jewish personalities. Both my brother and I regarded Jewishness as a natural part of our being, as we did the fact that we do not talk about this much among strangers. In our immediate surroundings and at my school everybody knew about our Jewish origin.

He changed his name so that we would not know that we are Jews. During the whole post-war period he lived in fear so that 'it' [i.e., the *Shoah*] would not happen again, but he did not have the courage to leave.

He never talked about Jewish origin. Jewishness was taboo.

He was fully conscious of his Jewishness and saw the solution in assimilation.

He thought that he was assimilated — his name was Kohn, and most of his friends were Jews — who also thought that they are assimilated!

In our family we talked very little about this. I realized only with hindsight, when I was 15, that our family contact was only with people of Jewish origin. Around that time my father tactically told his sister in Košice to take me and my sister to the cemetery where our grandparents are buried — and it was a Jewish cemetery. So gradually, and finally at the cemetery, I got it. I could also then understand why I didn't have a grandfather and a grandmother as did most of my classmates, why I had an aunt in England, and why most of the women who visited us in the summer had a tattooed number on their forearm... Gradually the talk at home became more about Jews, about their fate, a little bit about religious traditions — both parents were secular Jews — but, as I explained, I did not ask much, possibly out of fear that talking about all of this would bring more pain than relief, but mainly because of my inability to come to terms with all that suffering.

I read a book about Auschwitz, which contained some statistics. Most of these were about victims of Jewish origin. I knew that my grandparents were deported to Auschwitz. So I asked my aunt if grandparents were deported because they were Jewish.²⁵

My identity is fully bound up with a Jewish identity, which I understand in terms of the contradictions of my childhood and adolescence. The sense of otherness, of 'I against the others', was for me always a mystery. When I was 16, I finally received an 'answer' from my brother: 'Don't you know that we are Jewish?'. I was suddenly at peace — but, unfortunately, the substance was missing and is still missing today.

She never explained her or my Jewish origin, because she did not want me to be different. She told me only when I learned about it from my classmates and asked her.

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Another respondent said that he was told that he had been baptized as a Protestant but that the family did not belong to any denomination. That made sense, since they were communists. However, he added:

I have to laugh today when I remember that at least twice a month we received a letter from uncle Max from Israel. I couldn't wait for the letters because I was a passionate stamp collector. However, my mother always claimed that uncle Max lived in Poland. So that I wouldn't contradict her, she eventually stopped asserting that. However, she threatened me with the most severe punishment if I failed to say everywhere that uncle Max did not live in Israel but in Poland; otherwise the whole family would have terrible difficulties. My mother was very secretive about this, as she was about everything Jewish.

Strategies of full concealment were most frequently pursued in large cities, where urban anonymity offered the illusion that one's Jewish origin could be kept secret. As Jewish families differed in several crucial respects from their non-Jewish counterparts, attempts to conceal Jewish descent were doomed to failure, and often badly backfired. As noted above, members of the 'second' generation grew up in families with no or only very few relatives (who either perished in the *Shoah* or lived in Israel or some other Western country), and with parents whose demographic and social characteristics visibly marked them as Jews. Moreover, the Jewish parents had no control over the non-Jewish environment, and could not therefore prevent their children from learning about their Jewish descent from other sources, such as antisemitic taunts by classmates, neighbours, or by complete strangers. Thus, when confronted by antisemitic experiences of their children, or when their children brought home pejorative Jewish expressions without realizing their antisemitic character, many parents had no choice but to reveal 'the family secret'. Respondents were asked: 'Since when, and from whom do you know that you are Jewish?' and the largest number of replies were that experiences of antisemitism had led them to discover that they were Jewish. Although these experiences were not widespread, they clearly left a lasting impact, as is evident from the following replies:

Classically, from taunts and 'persecution' by peers among other children, at school, during play. I grew up in a small village.

When I pointed towards somebody at school that he is a Jew, my mother explained to me that I am also of Jewish origin.

My friend sneering at me in the street and calling me a 'stinking Jew'. He said that he was a Catholic and then asked what I was and I replied that I was a bronchitic. That was a strange thing to say but I knew as little about its meaning as I did about the meaning of 'Catholic'.

Other replies were:

I learned about it from my mother, when I asked her about the meaning of 'Jewish swine' — which a neighbour's son had called me.

ALENA HEITLINGER

When I talked slanderously about one classmate as an 'Icik', my father explained to me what it means, and that we are also Jewish.

She baptized both me and my brother. She did not talk about Jewishness until I was about eight, when children were calling us names. Only then did she carefully explain some things.

When I was seven, at school, when a boy from another class whom I didn't know started abusing me by shouting 'dirty Jewess, dirty Jewess'.

From my mother, when I was six. Children were making fun of my brother, which led to the first time that my mother explained that we were Jewish.

My first-grade teacher explained to the whole class that for sure I would know the answer, as I am (and I quote) 'a clever little Jew'.

A neighbour was shouting at me 'dirty Jew', and then I asked at home what does she mean by it.

It was written on the wall of our house.

A classmate told me. I refused to believe him at first, regarding it as a slander, but when I then asked at home, they confirmed my Jewish origin.

Under unpleasant circumstances. A classmate told me that my boy-friend would not go out with me any more, because I was Jewish, and that it was she who told him. I responded that I am not Jewish, and she replied that I am, because her mother told her.

. Neighbours were telling us to go to Palestine.

Others learned about their Jewish origin when they were taken to memorial services in synagogues or cemeteries, or to public commemorations of the victims of *Shoah*:

During a visit from relatives from abroad we went to the Pinkas synagogue²⁶ in Prague to see the names of relatives killed during the war. I was surprised to see the names of my grandfather, uncle, and so on. I said loudly that I thought that the only names here were of Jews. There was silence and then an awkward half-explanation from my mother, with the admonition that nobody should know about this.

During a visit to Hungary in the summer of 1964 in the synagogues of both pairs of my grandparents. It was very emotional as this was also the place from which my mother's parents were deported to Auschwitz (my paternal grandparents died before the war).

When a memorial plaque to the victims of *Shoah* was unveiled in Brno in 1965.

Suddenly and very traumatically while hearing a synagogue choir to commemorate 6,000,000 Jews tortured to death in concentration camps. It was a life-long shock.

A significant number of children discovered their Jewish origin either gradually, or suddenly and unexpectedly:

I heard about Jewishness from early on. For example, when looking at my little brother, my mother used to jokingly discover characteristics which she thought were typically Jewish. . . . When talking to me she often used the word *meshuge*, referred to relatives as *mishpokhe*, and so on. When we visited

JEWS IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

relatives or friends, they endlessly spoke about those who had not returned from concentration camp.

When I was six. I think that my mother concluded that I was old enough to know about it.

When I was ten, during a TV presentation of a film about Jews. I experienced persecution only later.

We were in Vienna visiting an acquaintance and I went to the kitchen to cut for myself a piece of salami. The acquaintance threw me out. It turned out that it was *Yom Kippur*. My mother then explained it to me.

Nothing special, general recognition that we have no grandfather and grandmother and very few relatives. And frequent recalling of the war and of their parents.

A Jewish friend noticed in the bathroom that I am circumcised.

Another respondent stated that she discovered she was Jewish when she saw a document on the table, which had been left there inadvertently and which gave her mother's origin as Jewish. Other replies were:

I was fascinated by the old photographs and wanted to know who was who. I also found in the attic old passports of relatives who did not manage to emigrate in 1939 and who perished in a concentration camp. I was also interested in a small, and for me 'strange' (Hebrew) prayer book, which my grandmother used.

A subconscious sense of Jewishness — I think I had that without really knowing what it all means. I was once sitting in a pub and somebody from the table next to us called to me: 'You have sidelocks like some Jew'. It shook me — and I was suddenly open to Jewishness. Soon after that I moved to Prague to attend a university, and met somebody who took me to a Jewish youth group.

From Concealment and Techniques of 'Passing' to 'Coming Out' as Jews

How did the young members of the 'second' generation come to terms with their Jewishness? Like their parents, they exhibited a wide range of attitudes, ranging from complete distancing and denial to full identification. Since most of them lacked any Jewish education, they needed first to find out what it means to be Jewish. Unlike the 'sudden Jews' interviewed by Kessel²⁷ in the USA, the post-Holocaust generation growing up under Czechoslovak communism had few resources available for learning about their heritage. The initial resources were Jewish themes in works of fiction or autobiography, film and theatre, both indigenous and in translation. As one respondent recalled:

I was different both in appearance (black hair, black eyes) and in a difficult to define Jewish aspect. I had no idea what it actually meant. If I knew anything, it was from literature, for example Lion Feuchtwanger.

I stated at the beginning of this paper (under the heading of 'Methods, data, and sources') that one of my sources was the study by Pavla

Frýdlová; she made available to me 15 transcripts of interviews carried out in 2001 and 2002. One of the respondents is quoted as saying:

When I was 10 years old and attending school, I used to read a great deal and my mother gave me some (Jewish) literature to read. I must say that I was quite interested in it, unlike my brother... I never knew anything about Jewishness and whatever I knew I learnt from literature, but only about Jewishness as such, not about religion.

Others, especially those who internalized the stigma associated with a Jewish identity, adopted various practices of invisibility and techniques of 'passing'. For example, a respondent from Brno recalled in a personal note to the author that, during her childhood she knew of nine Jewish children in her school, 'but none would want to be identified with their background. The word Jew was used to diminish popularity'. Another respondent had 'roughly the same number of Jewish and non-Jewish friends. I knew the Jewish friends via their parents, and I could discuss with them various Jewish issues. However, my best friend was a classmate who had a Jewish father. I knew about it from him — she never wanted to talk about it'.

Some became interested in Jewish issues only as adults. A respondent from Frýdlová's study, who came of age during the post-1968 period of communist 'normalization', learned about her mother's Jewish origin during adolescence, but started to identify with her Jewish roots only in the more favourable climate of the 1990s, after the collapse of communism (and of her marriage). By then in her mid-30s, she enrolled in a course in Yiddish, with her mother for the first time visited Terezin, began to read books with Jewish themes, became a member of the Prague Jewish community, and spent a year in Israel as a care-provider for an older Czech-speaking lady. She also commented that she now had a better understanding of her mother's anxieties, who was never satisfied if she had 'less than adequate' school marks. However, she believed that her parents had made the right decision not to worry her during her childhood with their concrete *Shoah* memories. When she had enquired about her grandparents, she was told, in a matter-of-fact-manner, that they had been killed during the war by the Germans. As a child and later as a teenager, she found that a satisfactory answer and inquired no further.

Indifference to one's Jewish roots also sometimes represented a form of teenage rebellion against parental pressure to adopt a Jewish identity. The previously cited respondent in Pava Frýdlová's study recalled:

I remember that when I was 16 or 17 years old, my parents assumed that I would have my own circle of friends, and they very much wanted me to have a Jewish circle of friends. However, when I was 17 or 18 I preferred to take part in various sport activities. I also loved to read... I consciously decided that I

JEWIS IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

did not want a Jewish circle of friends, and ended up in various non-Jewish circles.

However, she commented: 'I now regret that in 1968 I did not attend the [Prague Jewish] community, where there were very interesting lectures. I went there only once'. Other responses reveal that participation in a Jewish peer group was for many a crucial step in the construction of a strong and positive post-war Jewish identity. The responses also partly explain why siblings from the same family could end up with different Jewish identities:

I managed already in childhood to have a lot of Jewish friends, and I used to move in those circles, unlike my brother, who had no Jewish friends in his immediate surroundings. So when we look at our respective attitudes to Jewishness, his attitude was formed differently from mine, despite the fact that our mutual relations are very much conditioned by our Jewish origin.

Given the paucity of Jewish classmates, associating with Jews of the same age created a powerful sense of belonging and solidarity. However, attending Jewish communal events, such as youth celebration of *Hanukkah* or *Purim*, participating in formal and informal Jewish youth groups, displaying interest in Israel, or becoming religiously observant, brought the younger generation into conflict with the Communist officials who tended to regard such activities as subversive and anti-socialist, especially in the post-1968 'normalization' period.²⁸ During the earlier de-Stalinization period of 1962-68, when (as noted above) many members of the 'second' generation were reaching their adolescence and young adulthood, public displays of Jewishness carried fewer risks. Moreover, since the communist authorities were generally perceived to be antisemitic and anti-Israel, having Jewish ancestors or relatives in Israel could sometimes imply automatic membership of a special clandestine organization with no known rules. The sense of belonging to such a mildly conspiratorial and subversive group had the potential of providing the young generation with an important source of empowerment and a sense of pride in their Jewish identity. This sense of pride and empowerment was strongly reinforced by the decisive Israeli victory in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Jewish Youth Groups

Criteria for joining Jewish youth groups in the 1960s were quite flexible. Any self-identified and interested Jews were welcome, including (especially in Prague) many who were of mixed parentage and did not meet *halakhic* standards. The Jewish youth groups provided an opportunity to articulate a pluralistic post-war Czech/Slovak Jewish identity, which incorporated mainly intellectual and secular conceptions of Jewishness. Participation in the youth groups turned out to be a

ALENA HEITLINGER

formative experience, and led to life-long friendships and supportive transnational networks.

A former Bratislava resident was a member of the Slovak Jewish youth group 'Kuchyna' (Kitchen) — named after the ritual kitchen in the building of the Bratislava Jewish community where during 1966–68 an informal group of Jewish students would meet every Saturday and Sunday. She described the group as follows:

It had only a social character. What held us together was the fact that we were Jews. Several students from my high school (whom I did not know were Jewish) turned up in synagogue during *Rosh Hashanah*. We then used to meet for discussions, dancing, and sometimes we created our own celebrations of *Hanukkah* and *Purim*. There was even a rock group, in two different compositions because two of the original members emigrated... We were also interested in Israel and whenever somebody obtained a record with Israeli songs, we listened to it and then sang the songs (for example, '*Havenu gila*' or '*Yerushalayim shel zahav*'). From the time I emigrated to the present, I have been in contact with those with whom I formed friendship ties. In 2000 I visited Australia and met there several of these old friends.

She continued:

There was an earlier such group. It consisted of students of the pre-war generation (born during 1930–1940) from all of Slovakia. My cousin was a member and she met her husband there. During 1966–67 many young Jews moved to Bratislava to attend high school and university. We established contact with some of them, but for the most part they either kept to themselves, or they lived in student dormitories and on weekends returned home.

The Brno group, consisting of approximately 25 people, came together as a result of annual private *Seder* dinners which the then Chief Rabbi, Dr Richard Feder, organized in his apartment specifically for young people. By the early 1960s, those who attended this annual event could not all fit around his dining table, and additional seats had to be arranged. In later years, Dr Feder helped to organize exchange visits between Jewish youth groups in Prague and Brno. For example, in 1967 the Brno youth group took part in the Prague youth *Hanukkah* celebration. The group performed a programme of Israeli songs, instrumental music, and a short play by the Israeli playwright E. Kishon, to great applause.²⁹ Like their counterparts elsewhere in Czechoslovakia, most members of the group emigrated after August 1968. The group held its first reunion in Brno in June 2003. It was attended by both locals and émigrés.

The Prague Jewish youth group now called '*Děti Maislovky*' ('Children of Maisel Street'), mentioned earlier in this paper, also started as an informal group or, rather, as several informal groups with overlapping membership. Eventually, that youth movement became fully established. During 1963–1966, several young Prague Jews³⁰ who were eager to meet and

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

learn about their heritage, repeatedly made approaches to the leaders of the community to help them organize Jewish youth study groups and offer premises of the Prague Jewish community for youth meetings. In 1966, after year-long negotiations with the party-state authorities, the officials of the Council of Czech Jewish Religious Communities and the Prague Jewish Religious Community secured official permission to hold regular educational meetings for young Jews in the premises of the old Jewish community town hall, in Maisel street. These officially-sanctioned meetings were held every two weeks on Saturday evenings during the school year and were regularly attended by 50 to 80 young Jews whose ages ranged from 16 to 28.

After the events of August 1968 half of the group emigrated, but the ranks were replenished by new members — who had previously not known about the lectures or who had not been old enough to attend before 1968. However, in March 1974 these meetings had to come to an end, when the communist authorities forced my father to retire from his position as the secretary-general of the Council of Czech Jewish Religious Communities and of the Prague Jewish Religious Community

The educational meetings had consisted of lectures by volunteer speakers on various selected aspects of Jewish history, culture, religion, and identity. They filled important gaps in knowledge but, since they relied on volunteers with an idiosyncratic range of expertise, they could not provide a full substitute for the systematic Jewish religious education for *barmitzvah* and *batmitzvah* which is given to young Jews in Western countries.

The formal lectures were followed usually by informal gatherings of various sorts — such as socializing in pubs or cafés, trips to the mountains, or attending concerts. There were also smaller groups whose members had a shared interest in the theatre or in Jewish or Czech literature. Of particular significance was the amateur theatre group; it had been established before 1966 and one of its members said:

I used to perform in the theatre, in particular in the play 'Modche and Rezi',³¹ which was directed by Mrs. Dufková. The group, sometimes consisting of five and at other times of 20 people, used to meet (since 1964) once a week. We used to visit each other, go on trips together, attend the same parties. We formed very intense friendships, many of which survive to this day. For me, this was *the only* positive Jewish experience in Prague.

Some of the members of the theatre group belonged as children to an earlier amateur theatre group. Its importance for the formation of Jewish identity of the post-war generation was noted by O.Heitlinger.³² In his view, the most important memories for young Czech Jews in the 1960s were not merely religious experiences:

Several years ago children put on performances during the communal celebration of *Purim* and *Hanukkah* or they took part as spectators.³³ These

ALENA HEITLINGER

celebrations were attended by up to 100 or even more children. However, with each year participation declined, until in the final year fewer than 30 children came.³⁴ At these celebrations children presented small skits, recited poems, sang, and so on. These joyous experiences gave them a fragment of awareness that there existed out there something which is uniquely Jewish, something which belonged to them, as their cultural heritage or tradition. The festivals of *Purim* and *Hanukkah* are celebrations of liberation.³⁵

Since the collapse of communism in November 1989, the 'Children of Maisel Street' have held four reunions in Prague; they were highly successful. The fourth reunion took place in May 2003, when more than 130 Czech and Slovak Jews (by now middle-aged) came together; about half that total came from abroad and more reunions are planned for the future. The popularity of these gatherings shows that a Czech-Slovak Jewish identity is still important for both those of the post-war generation who remained in their native land and those who emigrated.

The group now also has members who had attended various communal events at the Prague Jewish municipal hall as children but who as adolescents had emigrated with their Zionist parents to Israel in the 1960s. The 'Children of Maisel Street' now have their own web site, with a discussion group, <http://www.geocities.com/detimaislovky>.

Emigration

There were many factors involved in the decision to remain in the country or to emigrate after the Soviet invasion of 1968. Some who wished to go abroad were torn between their attachments to family members, to friends, to their native language, and native land (while fearful of resurgent antisemitism) and, on the other hand, a desire to live in freedom in another country. Some who wished to emigrate worried lest the authorities would penalise their relatives who had remained in the country. Others decided to emigrate in order to solve their problems with their spouses or partners.

One respondent said:

To some extent we were all used to thinking about emigration, in the sense of asking a question and finding an answer to it. Some, like myself, answered this question in the negative. My prevailing viewpoint was that I could not live without Prague. The thought that after work I could not go down to Wenceslas Square, or that I could not meet with somebody there under the tail³⁶ was unimaginable. However, this decision was conditional on (latent) antisemitism not becoming openly hostile. If the latter happened, it was clear to me what principle to follow: if they don't like me, I don't have to be here. But, basically, I didn't think that this would happen (though not that it couldn't happen). I also knew how to recognize the symptoms telling me when to leave, so as not to repeat the indecisiveness of the end of the 1930s, when Jews did not believe that things could be worse until it was too late to

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

emigrate. If Jews started losing their jobs, apartments, social positions, and so on, without any reason (or openly because of that reason), then it was necessary to leave. Nevertheless, when I went in September 1968 to England (after the Warsaw Pact invasion) on a previously planned trip unconnected to the political events, I almost stayed. However, in the end I returned. Later, in 1984, I secured a transfer from my employer to work abroad, and was able to gradually prolong that stay. After 1989 I completed my move abroad and the emancipation from both my employer and officials in Czechoslovakia. However, if I am to be really honest about evaluating the reasons for my emigration, I was fleeing neither the regime nor antisemitism. . . ., but my personal problems

Other respondents stated:

I would have never left because of my parents. I would have considerably shortened their lives. I have never regretted my decision.

In 1968 I was 22, studying Russian and Slovak literature, and the only thing I wanted was to devote my life to Slovak literature. I knew no other language (except Russian) and still don't know any today. I thought that when the Russians saw our solidarity and unity, they would turn around and leave, if not immediately, then in a month or so. My parents were then 60 years old. But that was not the reason. My Jewish friends' parents who were of a similar age were sending their children out. They knew what was going to happen here.³⁷

For musician Peter Breiner, who in 1968 was only 11, and who emigrated to Canada only after the collapse of communism, the decision to leave was not immediate. 'There was no specific first moment. It was a gradual process, and it started a long time ago . . . I don't know the reasons exactly, but they lay deeply in communism and deeply in Slovakia.' Breiner delayed his emigration 'to prevent unpleasant consequences for those who would have stayed. By a lucky coincidence, the revolution came at a time, that after arriving to Canada, I didn't have to start from scratch.'³⁸

The post-1968 encounter with various Western Jewish communities and the non-Jewish environment created new contexts in which to redefine and renegotiate the largely secular and intellectual Czech/Slovak Jewish identities. Migration also meant leaving behind Czech or Slovak language and culture. In turn, learning and living in new host languages and cultures required redefinitions of Czech/Slovak identity. For many, one of the most liberating aspects of migration was the unprejudiced acceptance of Jews by the non-Jewish environment. As illustrated by the quotation below, Jewish emigrants from Czechoslovakia were pleased to discover that their Jewishness was not 'a big deal', and that the adoption of a Jewish identity in a larger non-Jewish environment was genuinely a free choice rather than an issue of fate:

In Czechoslovakia I used to encounter negative reactions, but since I have lived in Germany, nobody has been interested, nobody has asked me: 'So what

exactly are you?' Nobody has noticed or 'felt' my Jewishness like Slovaks tend to do.

Others witnessed a normal Jewish religious life for the first time. One respondent now resident in the U.K. recalled:

I encountered a 'normal' Jewish family (the family of my father's cousin) which keeps traditions, celebrates holidays, and regards its Jewishness as a matter of course, only after emigrating. I think that before then I connected Jewishness mainly with pain, tragedy, and complexity.³⁹

The encounter with joyous Jewish traditions and the visible self-confidence of British Jews helped several Czech Jewish immigrants to redefine their Jewish identity more positively. One respondent commented: 'My timorousness connected with Jewishness disappeared'.

For some, however, the encounter with Western Jewishness was marked by negative experiences. Often these were caused by a clash between the pluralistic secular post-war conceptions of Czech/Slovak Jewish identity and the narrower Western notions of Jewishness as religion. As noted above, most Czech/Slovak Jews received no Jewish religious education, and had no *barmitzvah*/*batmitzvah*. A significant proportion came from mixed marriages, and often had the 'wrong' Jewish parent — that is, the father. Even if the non-Jewish mother was a philosemitic communist dissident who suffered persecution on account of her identification with Jewish issues, this was regarded as irrelevant by Western Jewish officials. Moreover, many Western Jews saw the Czech/Slovak Jews only through the prism of the Cold War and anti-communism. In their view, communism made it impossible for Czech/Slovak Jews to experience 'true' Jewish life. Such an ethnocentric perspective not only failed to acknowledge the long-standing secular and atheistic belief system of Czech Jews, but failed as well to validate what many of the émigré respondents regarded as a fairly happy childhood. Thus, adapting to the Western religious conceptions of Jewishness in such a situation presented an enormous challenge.

Jews from communist Czechoslovakia who had experienced various forms of antisemitism were quite surprised to discover that they were 'insufficiently' Jewish when they tried to demonstrate their Jewish identity by joining a Western Jewish community or getting married in a synagogue. Many were astonished to learn that they had to provide a proof of their Jewishness, since they naively thought that they had left behind all forms of vetting when they emigrated from communist Czechoslovakia. Males who could show no evidence of circumcision or that they had celebrated their *barmitzvah* could provide no proof of Jewishness and both males and females whose mothers were not Jewish (although their fathers were) found that according to Orthodox Judaism, they were not Jewish. The reactions to such an unforeseen

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

problem differed, as seen from the following two statements from respondents:

I wanted to join but the Jews told me that because my mother was not Jewish (because her own mother had not been Jewish), I did not qualify. They told me that I could convert; but I am not religious. If God exists, I think that the Jewish one is looking after his people so well that practically all of them have been murdered so that I am certainly not praying to such a God. In fact, I regard all those who pray to him as utter lunatics. Since this experience, Jews have ceased to interest me.

The other respondent said:

When we moved to the West, I encountered for the first time people who believed in God and practised religion. I found it all quite strange and incomprehensible. I felt as a Jew and was offended not to be regarded as such by the Jews around me. For many years I manoeuvred between these worlds. My loves were mainly Jews, and when it started to get 'serious', inevitably the question of conversion arose. I converted only when I was 37 and that experience completely changed my life. Since I learned what Jewish religion actually entails, I was a position in which I could decide, because I knew all the alternatives. My husband is Jewish and we lead a normal life of a Jewish family. I have two children, my son had *barmitzvah*, daughter *babmitzvah*. I hope that they will find for themselves Jewish partners and that they will lead a Jewish life, be it in Germany, America, or somewhere else in the world. I wouldn't wish Israel for them or for us: I don't want them to live where there is war.

A more recent way of preserving a Jewish identity for the émigrés of the post-war generation has been the creation of Slovak/Czech Jewish groups in Toronto and London. Both groups were established as a result of focus group discussions which I conducted respectively in September 2002 and May 2003. The Toronto group has since expanded from the initial 12 participants to about 40 individuals, with a three to one ratio of Slovak to Czech Jews. It is named after the mystical Prague Jewish 'Golem' and there have been meetings every two months or so in the homes of various members. They have discussed issues relating to a) Slovak/Czech Jewish identity of the post-war generation; b) Canadian Jewry; and c) Israel, and the Middle-East conflict. Members have also watched Czech/Slovak films and documentaries with Jewish themes, listened to Jewish, Czech, and Slovak music, arranged a picnic in a Toronto park, and just enjoyed socializing. We regularly exchange e-mails on a variety of topics, and are planning more activities for the future. Some of these will also include non-Jewish or non-Slovak/Czech speaking spouses and children. Members of the group are both secular and religious, and halakhic and non-halakhic Jews. The formation of such informal groups abroad provides another data-set attesting to the

continuing significance of a broadly-articulated pluralistic Czech/Slovak Jewish identity.

Categorization of Identities

Jewish identities of the post-war generation of Czech/Slovak Jews range from negative through neutral to positive. Those who have a negative attitude are generally reacting to past suffering and to antisemitism; but they are the exception among my respondents: only two revealed such a sentiment; one said:

I perceive my Jewish origin as an unfortunate burden, as something which for me has no positive aspects, and is only related to the tragic destiny of my parents and ancestors. I have grappled with this issue for many years — even in psychotherapy — and for the most part have come to terms with it. Jewishness is for me connected with fear and inner conflicts. I am conscious of, and have myself experienced, many of the problems related to the so-called 'children of survivors', as they have been presented in various studies and books. From a psychological perspective it is all quite interesting.

The other stated:

Although I am assimilated, my husband is not Jewish, and very few of my friends in England are Jews, my main identity is Jewish, not Czech. This identity has a mainly negative context, by which I mean that I feel in me the burden of Jewish tragedy, the legacy of *Shoah*, and the weight of Jewish persecution. I did not want to raise my children as Jewish for this reason, and to this end was consciously looking for a non-Jewish partner.

Here it is important to bear in mind that individuals who would prefer not to be identified as Jews generally do not take part in studies about Jewish identity. Therefore, the data on their experiences and attitudes are often provided by their relatives, friends, or acquaintances. A Slovak Jew declared:

No Slovak environment can obliterate our identity even though my brother does not always acknowledge his Jewish origin. For example, right now, he has gone on a holiday to Portugal for two weeks; but this morning he telephoned me to wish me all the best for *Rosh Hashanah*. He simply cannot escape his Jewishness.

A similar comment was made by the Prague-based sibling of a Czech Jew, who found it difficult to escape his Jewish birth through assimilation:

My brother, born in 1951, would not complete this questionnaire. He does things strictly for money, wants to be consciously assimilated, but is not always successful in this. He regularly attends the Jewish community's celebrations of *Hanukkah*, *Purim*, *Seder*, but in principle never goes to pray. He has a non-Jewish wife, dislikes any discussions about Jewish topics, and provides minimal information about Jewishness to his only daughter.

JEWS IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Another variation on the negative-positive continuum has been the adoption of the technique of 'passing': privately acknowledging one's Jewish identity but refraining from doing so in a non-Jewish environment. One respondent revealed:

This concealment of mine is not particularly exciting or troublesome. I simply never bothered anybody with this, and whenever there was talk about Jews in a non-Jewish environment, be it with negative or positive connotations, I did not say anything but stayed silent and invisible. I think that this is a fairly common technique. Even in Switzerland I still have not found the courage to openly stand by my Jewishness in conflictual situations. We could simply call it an instinct for self-preservation rather than cowardice, which it perhaps deserves to be called. However, when the risk is relatively low, that is, when I know that there is no danger of antisemitic attitudes and moods — something one can never be sure about in a non-Jewish setting in Slovakia — I have no problem to openly acknowledge my Jewishness. All my friends and acquaintances know who I am.

Some respondents see their Jewish identity neither negatively nor positively, but as one aspect among many of their identities, and not necessarily the most important one:

I have to repeat again: I neither explain nor justify my Jewish origin. I am a Jew. Period. Maybe an American or Canadian of Czech-Jewish origin can contemplate which aspect of his/her American or Canadian identity is influenced by his/her Czech-Jewish origin.

If I feel anything in the way you defined the study, I most likely belong to the very heterogeneous group 'Children of the Holocaust'. Jewish identity is genuinely less important to me than several other identities. By that I mean membership in a certain family, occupation, or being with friends and sharing with them interests and exchanging viewpoints. A 'national' identity (languages which I speak, the places where I live or used to live, and passports and other personal documents which I used to own) also contributed to my individual identity. I don't think there is much point in trying to decide whether I am more Czech or Swiss, a mathematician, a statistician, an information specialist, a cyclist, moralist, tourist, a father of growing children, or a member of a family where there are more opinions than people. To be sure I am quite a conservative, middle-aged man who would like to feel everywhere at home and learn about many new things. I am, of course, not always successful in this.

The majority of participants in the study have a positive Jewish identity, which they mostly see as an important part of their being, and as something 'extra' which has enriched their life:

I perceive my Jewish origin as some 'added value', not as something basic (I know practically no religious or other traditions, I speak neither Yiddish nor Hebrew, and I was not inculcated with a sense of Jewishness during my childhood), but as something extra, which has enriched me with another dimension.

ALENA HEITLINGER

Finally, there are Slovak and Czech Jews with a strong religious identity; they are convinced that this is the only way to guarantee Jewish survival. The respondent who now lives in Germany commented:

Jewishness survived as religion for more than 2000 years, as a nation only during the last two centuries, and as a 'sense of belonging' only during the last century. Jewry will disappear with 'sense of belonging' Jews, because a 'sense' is both created and becomes defunct. Without the knowledge of, and faith in, Jewish religion and nation we will become extinct in subsequent generations. The majority of my friends who live in so-called mixed marriages raise their children only in the 'sense of belonging'. Most of these children do not grow up in Jewish surroundings and they select non-Jewish partners. Their children are no longer Jewish. My brother did not convert, so he is not a halakhic Jew. He feels Jewish, but it does not mean anything to his children (father's 'sense of belonging' and grandfather's concentration camp is too little). He would like his children to spend holidays with us (he lives in another city and whenever possible, his family visits us during the High Holy Days), and hopes that by some miracle Jewishness can be transmitted to them.

Thus Czech/Slovak Jewish identity rests on a fluid and pluralistic conception of Jewishness.

Conclusion

I have identified both commonality and heterogeneity of experience when analysing the complex processes which have shaped identity formation among the respondents who were part of the post-war generation of Czech and Slovak Jews who grew up under the communist regime in the period 1948-1989. The most important differences were found in a) parental background; b) the size of the towns; c) the year of birth (which in turn determined whether they came of age before or after the Soviet invasion of August 1968); d) participation in a Jewish peer group; and e) whether they had or had not emigrated. Parents considered themselves to be communist, anti-communist or politically pragmatic; consciously Jewish in religious, cultural, intellectual, or Zionist terms; assimilated or in denial of their Jewish origin; and supportive or ambivalent about their children's search for a Jewish identity. When compared with their Slovak counterparts, a higher proportion of Czech Jewish parents were secular, had only one Jewish parent, and were married to non-Jews. Their high degree of assimilation and their lack of religious observance reflect the great degree of secularization of Czech culture.

However, the differences appear to be not as significant as the similarities. The 'second' generation, like the 'first', represents a community of fate, largely brought together by politics and the non-Jewish environment. As has been noted in this paper, members of the post-war generation were in crucial aspects 'different', both from their

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Czech and Slovak peers, and from fellow Jews in Western liberal democracies. What set them apart from other Czechs and Slovaks were the trans-generational (non) transmission of parental *Shoah* experiences and parental ambivalence or even concealment of their Jewishness, which created in childhood a puzzling sense of otherness. As Jews, the young Czechs and Slovaks also stood out by their infrequent but psychologically significant personal experiences of antisemitism; and an emotional identification with Israel, which automatically put them on a collision course with the strongly anti-Zionist communist regime.

What separated them from other Jews in Western liberal democracies was the unconcealed stigma attached to Jewishness in Czech and Slovak culture as well as by the communist regime. That stigma led to a) a negative sense of otherness; b) an often painful search for understanding of Jewishness while the communist authorities and many of their parents preferred them not to identify with their Jewish background; and c) an absence of systematic Jewish (religious) education. It is worth repeating here what a respondent has been cited as commenting: 'The substance was missing and is still missing today'. Thus, rather than *content*, Czech and Slovak Jews of the post-war generation remember the *circumstances* in which distinct pieces of knowledge were acquired about Jewish traditions, rituals, personalities, and various works of art. Members of the 'second' generation also have fond memories of the exhilaration of meeting Jews of the same age and interests in Jewish youth groups, and of forming life-long friendships in these groups. Other shared bonds and experiences which have set Czech and Slovak Jews of the post-war generation apart from their Jewish peers in Western liberal democracies include attendance at Czechoslovak schools with a nationwide centralized curriculum, and familiarity and identification with much of Czech and Slovak culture.

Because of the specificity and uniqueness of their common experiences in communist Czechoslovakia, Czech and Slovak Jews of the post-war generation tend to feel most comfortable among people like themselves — which, incidentally, also characterized the generation of their parents. Their commonality of experience means that they understand each other, and are tolerant of each other's choices. While a question 'When did you find out?' might seem incomprehensible to a Jew who grew up in a Western liberal democracy, Czech and Slovak Jews know immediately what it refers to; this is the case even for those who always knew that they were Jewish. Their secular identity has been shaped not by Judaism but by similar life-course experiences and by a strong sense of common fate and group belonging.

We cannot confidently predict how many (if any at all) features of such a uniquely-constructed identity would be successfully transmitted to the next generation — which has come of age in a very different political and

socio-economic context created in the 1990s by the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War.

Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this paper was presented in Czech at an interdisciplinary conference 'Jews Today', at the Institute of Judaism, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovak Republic on 26 May 2003. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a grant which helped me to carry out research for this paper.

NOTES

¹ The world-famous Jewish museum in Prague also provides minimal information on the communist period, as does Tomáš Pěkný's authoritative *Historie Židů v Čechách a na Moravě* (The History of Jews in Bohemia and Moravia) — Praha:Sefer, 2001. The book has 702 pages, but only 12 of them are devoted to the post-war period and these contain only a chronological table with brief references to major cultural and political events with implications for Jews. Peter Salner's, *Židia na Slovensku medzi tradíciou a asimiláciou* (The Jews of Slovakia between Tradition and Assimilation) — Bratislava: Zing Print, 2000—includes an informative chapter on the communist period, but the chapter is not specifically focused on experiences of the post-war generation.

² Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952; Norman B. Ryder, 'The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 30, December, 1965; Carol Ryff and Victor Marshall (eds.) *The Self and Society in the Aging Process*. New York: Springer, 1999.

³ Glen H. Elder Jr., 'Approaches to Social Change and the Family', in John Demos and Sarane Spence Boocock (eds.), *Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978); and Alena Heitlinger and Susanna Trnka, *Young Women of Prague* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1998).

⁴ For a detailed description of the history of the group 'Children of Maisel Street', see Alena Heitlinger, 'Jewish Youth Activism and Institutional Response in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s', *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 32, no.2, 2002, pp. 25–42.

⁵ Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, 'Historical and Actual Minority Problems in Czechoslovakia', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 27, 1993, p. 93.

⁶ The precise number of *Shoah* survivors who remained or emigrated is not known. The most reliable statistics come from Israeli immigration records, and from membership lists of post-war Czech and Slovak Jewish religious communities. See Kurt Wehle, 'The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia, 1945–1948', in Avigdor Dagan (ed.), *The Jews of Czechoslovakia, Historical Studies and Surveys*, vol. III (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1984), pp. 499–530; Petr Brod, 'Židé v poválečném Československu (Jews in Post-war Czechoslovakia)', in V. Veber (ed.), *Židé v novodobých dějinách (Jews in Modern History)* Praha: Karolinum, 1997 pp. 147–162; Salner, op.cit.in Note 1 above, pp.

JEWS IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

165–6, 172–78; Pěkný, op.cit. in Note 1 above, pp. 638, 657; Laurent Rucker, *Stalin, Izrael a Židé* (Praha: Rybka Publishers, 2001), translated from the French original *Staline, Israël et les Juifs* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), pp. 106, 108. However, many secular Jews did not belong to any Jewish religious communities, and as such were statistically invisible. All figures are therefore estimates based on records of victims and survivors of the *Shoah*. As Salner, op.cit. in Note 1 above, p. 150, states so poignantly, ‘we know how many perished, but the fate of those who survived is less well known’.

⁷ A completely ‘normal’ religious life was impossible to achieve in communist Czechoslovakia, where religion was officially tolerated but disapproved of. The official ideology and school curriculum promoted atheism, and until the early 1980s the work and school week included Saturday mornings. Moreover, any public display of religiosity could be detrimental to one’s career and that of one’s children.

⁸ Salner, op.cit. in Note 1 above, pp. 173–8.

⁹ Heitlinger, op.cit. in Note 4 above, p. 37.

¹⁰ Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Upon the Doorposts of Thy House. Jewish Life in East Central Europe Yesterday and Today* (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1994), p. 40.

¹¹ The majority of the parents of my respondents spoke several languages, but with their children they spoke mostly Czech or Slovak. Among themselves, especially when they did not want their children to understand the content of their conversation, they would often resort to German, Hungarian, or whatever other language their children did not know. Because of the *Shoah*, some parents refused to speak German after the war. Parental multilingualism often contributed to their children’s sense of otherness.

¹² One respondent quoted below recalled several Yiddish expressions her mother used when interacting with her and her younger brother, such as *mishpokhe* (family/relatives) or *meshuge* (mad, lunatic). My parents also used these as well as several others, such as *chutzpah* or *oy vey*. I remember my surprise when as a 10-year-old child I discovered that my classmates did not know what *meshuge* meant. I thought until then that it was a Czech word.

¹³ Political issues were discussed in both communist and anti-communist families. Answers to the question ‘Was politics discussed in your household?’ revealed that parents discussed at home ‘all current topics’ or ‘daily political world events’. Specific issues included ‘antisemitism, Zionism, foreign policy, current political events and situation (both internal and foreign)’, ‘differences between the theory and practice of communism’, ‘domestic economy, the reasons for the failure of communism’, and ‘fascists and former Slovak fascists who became communists’. In some cases, ‘discussion about political show trials came quite late. My father was imprisoned and that is why this was not a topic of conversation’. In one case, a respondent born in 1954 revealed that her parents discussed with her ‘all political topics, but only around 1968, because before then they were worried that I might say something at school’. In a similar vein, another respondent recalled that in his household politics was discussed ‘politically’: ‘we discussed politics as such, both domestic and foreign, with emphasis on not creating for ourselves any problems or unpleasantness’. Growing up in such families made members of the ‘second’ generation politically quite shrewd.

¹⁴ For many secular Jews, celebrating Christmas did not pose a major problem because under the communist regime Christmas became a largely secular, materialistic holiday. Christmas was more about a Christmas tree, decorations, presents, special baking, and a traditional dinner with carp and a potato salad than about celebrating the birth of Jesus. Nevertheless, some parents felt uncomfortable by the Christian aspect of the holiday. Since they did not want their children to be singled out as 'different', they often adopted an uneasy compromise, such as having carp for dinner but doing without a Christmas tree.

¹⁵ Peter Salner, 'Parametre židovskej identity' (The Parameters of Jewish Identity), *Židovská ročenka* (The Jewish Yearbook), 5756/1995-96, p. 119.

¹⁶ Their attitudes ranged from a belief that 'this cannot last', to a generalized fear, and a specific dislike of Jews who supported communism. One Prague-born respondent now living in Australia recalled his father's attitude towards communism in these terms: 'He was afraid of them and hated those Jews who tried their best to join the communists and in this way created hate against the Jews'. A most common attitude was a pragmatic one, which meant keeping one's views to oneself. As one Bratislava-born respondent put it, her father 'had his own crystallized view of socialism, but he tried to survive and safeguard his family, so he kept his views to himself'.

¹⁷ A leading member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party already before the war, Eduard Goldstücker spent the war years in exile as a postgraduate student at Oxford University and as an official of the Czechoslovak government in exile in London. Later, he was the first Czechoslovak ambassador to Israel but became a victim of the communist purges in the 1950s and was imprisoned. After his rehabilitation, he was appointed Professor of German literature at Charles University and was a renowned expert on Franz Kafka. He played a leading role during the 'Prague Spring', and after the Soviet invasion in August 1968 went into his second British exile. He taught at the University of Sussex until his retirement and returned to Czechoslovakia after the 1989 Velvet Revolution. He died in Prague in 2001.

¹⁸ Eduard Goldstücker, *Vzpomínky (1913-1945)* (Memoirs, 1913-1945) — Praha: G plus G Publishers, 2003 — p. 59.

¹⁹ Salner, op.cit. in Note 1 above, p. 159, notes a certain paradox in social perceptions about Jewish communists: 'The mass media presented as people of Jewish origin mainly individuals who were active politically or culturally. However, most of these 'visible' Jews both verbally and in writing renounced their Jewishness, repudiated religion as prejudice, and subscribed to a 'progressive scientific ideology'. In Slovakia, where everybody knows everybody else, their Jewish origin was no secret. However, it was these 'visible' Jews who influenced the most the broad perception of the whole Jewish community. To the outside, [the Jewish communists] looked as the only representatives of Judaism, yet they themselves supported assimilation, publicly declared their support for the communist ideology and Slovak culture, and raised their children accordingly. Their external conduct was as 'non-Jews' (not as anti-Jews), and an eventual return to the identity of their ancestors was frequently forced by external pressure (Nazi or communist)'.

²⁰ An interview posted on www.chaverim.sk,

²¹ Focus group discussions revealed that their Czech counterparts felt very isolated, since there were typically no Jews or at most only one or two among

JEWES IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA

their classmates. I was the only Jew in my class throughout my elementary school, as was my younger sister. I acquired another Jewish classmate from a mixed background in my high school, but she was not then particularly interested in exploring Jewish issues. (She is now.)

²² Salner, *op.cit.* in Note 1 above, p. 252.

²³ Ota Heitlinger, 'Židovská mládež v obvodu RŽNO, její aktivizace v poslední době a problematika, která s tím souvisí' (Jewish Youth in the District of CCJRC, its Activism in the Recent Period, and Resulting Problematics). Confidential report submitted to the Czech Ministry of Education and Culture, 21 June 1965, pp. 3-4. Personal archive of Ota Heitlinger.

²⁴ O. Heitlinger, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

²⁵ As was the case in Poland, the Czechoslovak communist school curriculum and general communist propaganda minimized the Jewish presence in Auschwitz. At the Auschwitz museum established after the war, 'informational material referred to Jews simply as one of a number of peoples deported to Auschwitz from more than two dozen countries... The official guidebook to the camp referred to "six million Polish" citizens killed in the war, not mentioning that half of these were Jews, representing nearly all of the Jewish population': Gruber, *op.cit.* in Note 10 above, pp. 244-5. In a similar vein, the official Czech tourist guides in Terezin used to speak of "360,000 Czech citizens killed by the Nazis", without mentioning that nearly all of them were Jews': Charles Hoffman, *Gray Dawn. The Jews of Eastern Europe in the Post-Communist Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 31.

²⁶ The Pinkas synagogue is an impressive memorial to Czech victims of the Holocaust, with a turbulent history of its own. It was established in the 1950s as part of the State Jewish Museum in a disused synagogue, where the internal walls listed all the names of the 77,297 Jews from Bohemia and Moravia killed by the Nazis. During the period of 'communist normalization' in the 1970s and 1980s the synagogue was closed, officially for renovation, and all the names inscribed on the walls were removed. However, the official guidebooks continued to list it as a memorial to the victims of Nazi persecution and there were periodic reports that the memorial would soon be reopened. In the end, the Pinkas synagogue was reopened to the public only after the fall of communism, and full reconstruction was completed only in 1996. The building unfortunately suffered extensive damage during the Prague floods in the summer of 2002: Gruber, *op.cit.* in Note 10 above, pp. 33-37; Brod, *op.cit.* in Note 6 above, p. 157.

²⁷ Barbara Kessel, *Suddenly Jewish. Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover their Jewish Roots* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2000).

²⁸ As one respondent, born in 1951, stated, 'during my university studies in Bratislava, Jewish communal life was minimal. Moreover, I was afraid to attend public events out of fear that they might expel me from the university, where life was difficult for me already on account of my brother, who emigrated in 1969'.

²⁹ O. Heitlinger, *op.cit.* in Note 23 above, p. 10; and Judith Youdell, personal communication.

³⁰ These included several Slovak Jews who were then students at various Prague universities. At least one Prague member of 'Children of Maisel Street' learned about the group from these Slovak Jewish students: 'I experienced a radical change in the relation to my surroundings only at the university. I met

there young Jews who attended lectures at the Jewish community. It is rather ironic that I was brought to the community by my Slovak Jewish student peers, although it was me who had the actual “home right” at the community’.

³¹ ‘Modche’ and ‘Rezi’ are literary characters created by the Czech Jewish author Vojtěch Rakous (Adalbert Östreicher), who lived from 1862 to 1935. His collection of short stories, entitled *Modche and Rezi*, depicts Czech Jewish life in rural areas. This work was also published during the communist period, in 1958 and 1968.

³² O.Heitlinger, op. cit. in Note 23 above, p. 4.

³³ Children’s performances during communal celebrations of *Hanukkah* and *Purim* were also organized by the Jewish community in Bratislava. Under the direction of Mrs. Luknarová, children recited poems or acted in folk religious plays.

³⁴ As the children grew older, they often lost interest in a children’s theatre, and because of the demographics of the *Shoah*, there were not enough other children available to take their place. Another likely reason for the diminishing numbers was the availability of legal emigration to Israel in the 1960s. O. Heitlinger op. cit. in Note 23 above, p. 3, estimates that there were 40–50 children among those who left Prague for Israel in the early to mid-1960s. Their parents were typically the most active members of the Prague Jewish community, who would attend most communal events at the Prague Jewish town hall, including those specifically designed for children.

³⁵ Theatre also played an important role in dissident Jewish circles during the period of normalization. In 1981, after considerable difficulty, the Jewish town hall became the setting for the performance of the play ‘Ester’, as part of that year’s communal celebration of *Purim*. The play was written by the dissident playwright and current chief Czech rabbi Karol Sidon. He was unable to see the play himself, since shortly before *Purim* he was arrested and imprisoned. For more details about the performance, see Jiří Daniček, ‘Pražský purim’ (Prague Purim), *Roš chodeš*, vol. 64, April, 2002.

³⁶ The famous statue of St. Wenceslas by the Czech nationalist sculptor Myslbek is a favourite meeting place in Prague. The sculpted St. Wenceslas sits on a horse — hence the respondent’s reference to the statue’s tail.

³⁷ Interview with Jan Strasser. www.chaverim.sk.

³⁸ www.chaverim.sk.

³⁹ Even those who were familiar with Jewish rituals at home as children or from communal celebrations preferred religious life abroad. Communal celebrations of Jewish festivals in post-war Czechoslovakia were attended mainly by members of the ‘first’ generation, and often lacked joy. One respondent recalled: ‘I went several times to the *Seder* dinner at the Jewish community, because I don’t have my own family. I was also influenced by memories from childhood, when my father used to lead *Seder* dinners at home. Such communal dinners took place in Košice even before 1989; in fact, they took place without interruption, but the people there were predominantly old, and it was all very sad. I experienced a completely different *Seder* in Israel or with guests from Israel after 1989, with joyous songs, pleasure, children, youth’.