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## **Jewish Identities in Croatia – a Social Psychological Perspective**

### SUMMARY

The present study focuses on the way in which Zagreb Jews make sense of themselves and their world. It investigates how historical and socio-political changes have influenced transformations in Jewish identities, and how three generations of Croatian Jews living in Zagreb, the eldest (aged 70+), middle (aged 40–55) and younger (aged 20–30) generation, respond to changes in their social milieu. The study hinges on the premise that identity cannot be formed in isolation, but its emergence and development can only be achieved through social interaction. Embedded in a historical and social context, identity is treated as a product of the interaction between an individual and his environment, in which an individual is an active participant. This qualitative research, based on individual interviews (with the older and middle generation) and group interviews (with the younger generation) demonstrates that the Jews of Zagreb are active participants in their identity construction. Influenced by external factors, especially the Holocaust, the communist regime and the rise in Croatian national consciousness, Jews negotiate a sense of continuity via their own self-narratives, relating it to the self-narratives of others in their environment. A sense of self as a Jew develops from social interactions and meaningful relationships.

KEY WORDS: identity, social identity, contemporary social psychology, Jews, Croatia, qualitative research

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 On a Personal Note**

The present study is primarily an academic work. It is also a personally meaningful journey into identity transformation amongst Croatian Jews, a group to whom the researcher herself belongs. The study acknowledges the subjectivity of both the researcher and those researched, and attempts to emphasise that social phenomena cannot be studied under a strictly positivistic paradigm. This study makes a claim for the subjective dimension of social research, being aware of its limitations, but even more aware of the advantages it brings. Moreover, in this study I seek to explore the participants' construction of Jewish identities and not my own. In spite of my personal involvement, I have been careful not to use my own knowledge and experience as a framework for analysing the constructions of my participants' identities.

Furthermore, the subject of this study is of a profound personal interest. However, I hope to demonstrate the importance of this study not only for the Jewish world and the communities within it, but also the contribution it makes to social psychological research regarding identity transformation. There has been a wealth of studies addressing the issue of identity construction, and I hope this one will add to the research corpus.

## 1.2 Jews in Croatia

The Jewish population in Croatia was relatively small, in relation to other Eastern countries: at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were approximately 20,000 Jews in Croatia.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, numerous Jewish organisations – humanitarian, cultural, recreational, and youth – were established.<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant events that symbolised the prominent role Jews maintained in Croatian society was the erection of the synagogue in 1867 in central Zagreb (Goldstein, 2001). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many more synagogues were built around Croatia, a testimony to the dynamic and vibrant Jewish life of that time. Linguistic and cultural assimilation with high rates of inter-marriage exemplified the ambition of Jews to integrate into a non-Jewish environment (Goldstein, 2001). In addition, the effects of internal disputes between the Orthodox and Reform branches of Judaism had taken shape (I. Goldstein, 1998), the origins of which can be found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century *Haskalah* movement.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, in 1941 only 2% of the total Jewish population of Zagreb were Orthodox Jews, and Reformists freely exercised their influence and power (Goldstein, 2001). Also, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, came a proliferation of Zionist ideas, inviting Croatian Jews to learn about their history and culture, and to develop their national consciousness. In particular, *Hashomer Hatzair*, a Zionist-socialist youth movement, attracted considerable numbers (Loker, 1997).<sup>4</sup>

However, World War II broke out and the destiny of Yugoslav Jews followed the destiny of the Jews in other parts of Europe. About eighty per cent of Jews from Bosnia and Herzegovina perished: about 17,000 being killed in the infamous Croatian concen-

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<sup>1</sup> In comparison to Hungary: 600,000, Romania: 800,000, and Poland: 3,000,000 (Goldstein, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> There was an extensive network of local organisations that fell under a number of categories according to sex, age, religious affiliation, ideology, Ashkenazim or Sephardim, etc. Alongside Jewish Schools, Youth Organisations, Jewish Women Societies, B'nai B'rith Lodge, Hevra Kadisha (burial society), and many other social and cultural societies, Yugoslavia's finest and largest Jewish Home for the aged was established in Zagreb in 1911 (Friedenreich, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> *Haskalah* is the Hebrew term for the Enlightenment movement and ideology, which began within Jewish society in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as a form of European Enlightenment. The originator of the movement was Moses Mendelssohn. The movement was characterised with linguistic assimilation (a move away from Yiddish and towards the mother tongue, e.g. German or French, in some instances Hebrew), cultural assimilation, a considerable change in religious education, and a trend toward secularised culture and philosophy. The observance of *Halacha*, Jewish religious law, started to be neglected, and many began to identify themselves as e.g. "Germans" or "Frenchmen of the Mosaic religion". The *Haskalah* ideology was one of the foundations of the Reform movement in Judaism, bringing changes in religious rituals, prayers and philosophy (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*/7, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> *Hashomer Hatzair* (Hebrew for the "Young Guard") was a movement that sought to create a synthesis between Jewish culture and defending the land of Israel on one hand, and universal cultural and philosophical values on the other, which became a characteristic aspect of the movement's ideology (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*/7, 1972).

tration camp Jasenovac (Goldstein, 2001: 636, 342). In Zagreb alone there lived 10,740 Jews on the eve of World War II, more than 8,000 of whom lost their lives (S. Goldstein, 1998: 20). Barely 20% survived. In 1948, with the establishment of Israel, 1,250 – exactly half the Jews of Zagreb – emigrated to Israel, leaving the Zagreb Jewish Community with 1,200 members (S. Goldstein, 1998).

Jews in communist Yugoslavia were treated as equal citizens and consequently unexposed to discrimination of any kind. The Jewish Community of Zagreb was a part of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, involved in numerous (albeit secular) social and cultural activities, but its religious nature was limited. Many Yugoslav Jews simultaneously nurtured both Zionist and patriotic ideals since many of the older generations had participated in the liberation of Yugoslavia (Gordiejew, 1999).

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the establishment of an independent Croatia, Jews retained their status as equal citizens within the new republic. Despite this legal safeguard, a certain sense of uneasiness crept into Croatian Jewish circles, largely due to the government's intention to restore NDH, and re-present it in a positive light (S. Goldstein, 1998).<sup>5</sup> In August 1991, the Jewish Community headquarters and the Jewish cemetery in Zagreb were bombed, leaving the Croatian Jewry distressed and fearful, but with no casualties (S. Goldstein, 1998).<sup>6</sup> Excluding these events, anti-Semitic incidents were only sporadic, mainly due to Croatia's international political ideology. In the wake of the 2000 elections and the subsequent change to a social-democratic government, the general attitude towards Jews has been one of partiality. Indeed, nowadays Croatian Jews live peacefully and without fear.

A more recent historic event for Jews in Croatia occurred in 1998, when a full-time rabbi was appointed. After some fifty-five years without religious and spiritual leadership, the Croatian Jewry today can once more practice Orthodox Judaism, observe religious rituals (for instance, circumcision rites, Bar Mitzvah, Orthodox marriage ceremonies) and celebrate Jewish holidays if they should feel so inclined. Many changes have been implemented (such as the availability of kosher food and opportunities to study and practise Judaism) and the rabbi has revolutionised and transformed Jewish life in Croatia in many ways. Perhaps most significantly, Jews in Croatia today have the possibility to lead an Orthodox Jewish life, if they so choose.

### 1.3 A Portrait of the Jewish Community of Zagreb

The total number of Jews in Croatia, according to the membership list available in the Jewish Community of Zagreb, is 1,716, in a country of 4.3 million.<sup>7</sup> The Jewish

<sup>5</sup> Some of the symbols of NDH were re-introduced in rudimentary objects, such as a national flag and a national currency; also, streets were re-named after Ustasha leaders.

<sup>6</sup> Till today, the perpetrators of the terrorist attack have not been reliably determined. The Croatian government condemned the attack and generously provided a partial loan with which the Community building was renovated (S. Goldstein, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> The figure is taken from the directory in the Jewish Community of Zagreb. The directory is based on the overall membership list, implying that these members, by merely becoming members of the Jewish Community, have formed their Jewish identities in some ways. Perhaps there are other Jews in Croatia (some estimate 800–900 more), who are not members of any Jewish Community, and I assume that they do not have a Jewish identity, or that the "Jewish" part of their identity is not an important aspect to them.

Community of Zagreb, founded in 1806, continues to have the leading role among the nine other Jewish Communities in Croatia, and is by far the largest in number. The Communities in Čakovec (24 members), Daruvar (26), Koprivnica (21), Slavonski Brod (4) and Virovitica (8) have only a few members, who are determined to sustain Jewish life in those regions. The Communities in Split (110) and Dubrovnik (45) are curators of a great heritage, and their members are engaged in maintaining Jewish life with pride and dignity (Kraus, 1996). The Communities in Osijek (93) and Rijeka (75), once prominent, today nurture tradition and memory with optimism for the continued existence of Jews in those parts.

The focus of Jewish life in Croatia is in Zagreb, with a total number of 1,310 members. In the Community building itself, there is a synagogue, a kindergarten, a youth club and a club for seniors, a valuable Judaica library, and an art gallery. The activities include a Jewish cultural society *Miroslav Šalom Freiberg*<sup>8</sup>; a Jewish folk dancing group *Or Hashemesh*; a Kletzmer band *Jewsers*; a ceramics group *Bezalel*; and very a dynamic publishing output, publishing bimonthly Community newspapers, *Ha-Kol*, *Novi Omanut*, *Voice* (English edition), and a periodic youth paper, *Motek* (Kraus, 1996). In addition, there is a children's Sunday school; Hebrew classes; the *Maccabi* sports club; and finally, the Jewish Home for the aged, *Lavoslav Švarc* (Kraus, 1996).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 A Social Psychological Perspective

In social science literature, the concept of identity holds a remarkable position. As Gleason (1983) observes in his historical analysis, the notion of identity in social sciences has taken two distinct paths. One path can be traced to the work of Erik Erikson, who popularised the expressions *identity* and *identity crisis*. Working within the Freudian tradition, Erikson found identity in the deep psychic structure of the individual, defining it as internal, integrated and continuous in time (Erikson, 1959). The other approach was first formulated in the works of C. H. Cooley and G. H. Mead, who spoke of "the self", and also the work of Goffman, who had shifted the terminology from "the self" to "identity" (Gleason, 1983). Within this framework, identity is considered to be an artefact, a product of the interaction between an individual and society. It is a process which reoccurs in every social situation, and is thus characterised by multiplicity and the possibility of frequent change.

This paper adopts the latter, more sociological, approach. It rests on the premise that self-concept, or identity, cannot arise in isolation or through private experience. Instead, the emergence and development of self-identity can only be achieved through social contact and encounters, and this idea is the foundation upon which the present paper stands. Furthermore, the paper adopts Breakwell's (1986: 9) definition of identity as "a dynamic social product, residing in psychological processes, which cannot be understood except in relation to its social context and historical perspective". It is precisely around this idea that the present paper will be constructed.

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<sup>8</sup> Named after the highly respected Croatian rabbi who was deported to Auschwitz in 1943 (Goldstein, 2001).

## 2.2 Towards an Integration of Personal and Social Identity

Traditional social psychological research on the topic of identity originates in the theories presented by Tajfel (1981) and Turner (1987). Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (SIT) clearly distinguishes personal and social identity. Moreover, as proposed by Tajfel (1981), identity is presented on a continuum, wherein personal identity occupies one end and social identity the other. Personal identity refers to a set of self-descriptions that are more "personal", more idiosyncratic. Social identity is "switched on" in intergroup behaviour and makes group behaviour possible; it is more stereotypical (Tajfel, 1981). Similarly, Turner's Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) proposes a demarcation between personal and social identity. In this model, however, identity is not placed on a continuum but represented in the form of a hierarchy, from a subordinate to a superordinate level of self-categorisation. Depending upon the situation, a different level of self-perception will become salient, and thus the dichotomy between personal and social identity is primarily temporal (Deaux, 1992).

Other authors, commenting on sociological forms of identity, believe that a clear differentiation between personal and social identity cannot be made. For example, G. H. Mead (1934) argued against any such distinction. For Mead, these two identities were in essence one and the same thing (Deaux, 1992). Similarly, social constructionist approaches support the notion of the inseparability of the personal and the social, with social constructionists like Berger and Luckmann (1966) affirming that personal meanings and self-consciousness are reproduced and constructed in the social context, leading to a dialectical relationship between the self and society as the self reacts towards the society that shaped it. Therefore, one's personal identity cannot be separated from the context in which it develops. The interdependence of identity and society, the dialectic of the self and the other, is embedded in the social, cultural and historical processes that determine psychological realities (Semin, 1986).

The present paper adopts a similar stance; it neither presents nor emphasises the demarcation between personal and social, but argues for the integration of personal and social identity. Although social identity is not synonymous with "personal" identity or self-concept – containing non-social components such as physical attributes – I would like to suggest that social identity is probably the most prominent or salient aspect of identity for most people. The central idea is to investigate how history, culture and social environment permeate individual experience and establish the frameworks within which one's sense of self emerges.

Further, Tajfel's SIT and Turner's SCT are traditional, individualistic approaches in social psychology that place an individual as the main focus of analysis, underestimating larger societal, political and cultural determinants in the development of identity.<sup>9</sup> It would be wrong to overemphasise fixed notions of "us" versus "them" (Tajfel, 1981) which are no longer applicable in contemporary, ever-evolving societies. In a changing, global world,

<sup>9</sup> The idea that Tajfel's and Turner's theories are individualistic in their analysis of macrosocial group relations has been addressed by Foster and Louw-Potgieter (1991), Hogg and Abrams (1988), and Henriques (1984), to name but a few. They have questioned the claim put forward by SIT and SCT that they are "truly social" social psychological theories.

communication and interaction transcend the spatial and the temporal; “we” and “they” have become arbitrary categories. Contemporary, multi-cultural societies need to move away from the dichotomy of the “ingroup” and the “outgroup”. Global societies consist of people belonging to different social groups and subgroups and pose a challenge to traditional social psychological theories. In order to study the meaning and structure of identities, macro events in society must be considered as major determinants in the emergence of identity. For this reason, I would like to propose a move away from the individualistic approaches in social psychology in favour of contemporary social psychological theories that investigate societal and historical processes in identity creation and construction.

The concept of self is socially produced (Doise, 1988). In other words, particular situations within a social context influence the dynamics of self-concept. As suggested by Duveen and Lloyd (1986: 219), individuals are so “inextricably interwoven in a fabric of social relations” that the individual cannot be detached from the network of complex social processes. And the complexities of social and psychological processes shape the identity of the individual, which in turn becomes responsive to its social context (Breakwell, 1986). In addition to the intrinsic relevance that social context holds in identity creation, events in temporal transitions must also be included in any contemporary theory on identity development. In order to understand an individual’s identity, or sense of self, it is not sufficient to observe his relations with others in a solely social context, but additionally, one must regard these relations as embedded in a historical context (Strauss, 1959). Furthermore, as Strauss (1959) suggested, identities are not an expression of merely personal but also social histories; identity is linked with the past and rests upon history. It is tied to its historical experiences, rooted in distant historical events. For this reason, it is crucial to consider the historical and socio-political processes that shape identity formation. Historical and political events taking place in a society influence the meaning and dynamics of identity. Large-scale political, social and historical processes construct one’s sense of identity and must be investigated in order to examine changes affected on the structure and content of identities.

In this paper, identity is seen primarily as a product of the interaction of the individual with his physical and social environment. It is regarded as a dynamic and fluid process, embedded in, and responsive to, its historical and social context. Historical context is a temporal transition referring to historical events and experiences that have taken momentum and became rooted in collective memory. Inspired by Breakwell’s division of social context into structure and process (1986), social context as referred to herein is taken to represent interpersonal networks and group memberships (structure) as well as social and political ideologies (process), which establish systems of values and beliefs. The individual is seen not as a static or passive entity but as an active participant within his historical and social matrix, who initiates movements and reacts to his environment.

### **2.3 Particularities of Jewish Identity**

A challenging issue for Jews in modern times has been their national identity (Friedenreich, 1979). Being a Jew in traditional Jewish societies constituted a complete sense of one’s self-identity. In addition, the congruity between family and society in pre-modern times prevented Jewish identity from becoming a problem (Meyer, 1990). With the

struggle for emancipation, Jewish national awareness began to assume political grounds, and to threaten the continuity that had been prevalent in traditional societies and across generations. Ever since, and especially in such times of ultra-modernity, the issue of Jewish identity has continued to perplex.

Jewish and non-Jewish academics as well as lay people have long debated whether Jews are a racial, religious, ethnic or cultural group (Chervyakov, Gitelman, Shapiro, 1997). Historically, Judaism<sup>10</sup> and ethnicity have been fused, and Jewish identity has been treated as being composed of both national and religious elements (Herman, 1977; Meyer, 1990). Hence, Judaism is not just a religious model analogous to Christianity; “[it] is a religious civilisation of one particular nation, [that] resides in the Jewish people and reflects its history” (Herman, 1977: 36). Indeed, Jewish people have for centuries sustained an indissoluble connection between the people, the land of Israel and the Torah.

But the idea that Jewish people are a single group that shares the same history can be powerful on a purely theological or ideological level (Webber, 1997). Today, the overwhelming majority of Jews live outside the land of Israel, as citizens of other countries composing a minority group. In Diaspora, despite many successful attempts to institutionalise Jewish organisations, there is no public Jewish forum wherein Jewish movements can be expressed and confronted (Schweid, 1994). Any study of Jewish identity in Diaspora ought to be concerned with its embeddedness in a non-Jewish environment. Accordingly, contemporary Jewish identity may be studied from a historical perspective, but the social relations between Jews and the wider environment in which they live should be given due consideration. As equal participants in the social, cultural and political life in their respective countries, Jews have been sensitive to the historical and socio-political experiences and processes of change that ultimately influence the construction of their identities, or as Webber (1997) rather more harshly contended, Jews in Diaspora are only partially Jewish, and their cultural or national identities as Englishmen, Frenchmen or Croatians are activated along with their Jewish identities.<sup>11</sup>

The main elements in Jewish identities are, as Meyer (1990) proposed, Enlightenment, anti-Semitism and Zion. Indeed, these particular political and social elements have had a profound and significant effect on the construction of modern Jewish identities. Whilst in no way attempting to belittle the significance of these elements, it must be reiterated that identities are also sensitive to societal processes that fluctuate on a daily basis. Tremendous changes take place daily, and it is within such a framework that creation of Jewish identities must be observed. Jewish identity, and Jewish people as its carriers, is indeed a psychosocial phenomenon. But it is only when Jewish identity is studied from a historical and societal perspective that the unique interweaving of religious and national components may be properly understood. Therefore, Jewish identity must be viewed as a product of historical evolution, embedded in a social context, and responsive to on-going societal processes.

<sup>10</sup> Judaism is herein after referred to as Jewish *religion*.

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Neusner (1981) wrote: “The truth is, today there is no such thing as a single Jewish identity, as there assuredly was in times past an identity one could define in meaningful terms. Jewishness is now a function of various social and cultural settings, and is meaningful in those settings only” (quoted in Oppenheim, 1984: 225).

Above all, Jewishness is a voluntary act of self-identification. Whereas national citizenship or loyalty to the nation is given or imposed from the outside, Jewish identity should be understood as a product of rational and conscious *choice*.<sup>12</sup> And as such, Jewish identity ought to be viewed as an activity that is neither given nor imposed, but is foremost voluntary.<sup>13</sup> In essence, Jewish identity becomes a “reflexive project” (Giddens, 1991). One *participates, engages and invests* in an active and creative process of constructing one’s Jewish identity. It is something that is not given, but *develops* through social interactions, and within the boundaries of historical and societal institutions. The individual is aware and conscious of his Jewish identity, routinely creating and sustaining it, thus forming a “trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future” (Giddens, 1991: 75).

## 2.4 Research Questions

Historical and socio-political transformations that occurred on the territory of the former Yugoslavia over the last 60 years have significantly influenced the changes in social identities among Croatian Jews. The present research aims to investigate the dynamics of the change in Jewish identities by describing and interpreting how three generations of Croatian Jews living in Zagreb, the eldest (aged 70+), the middle (aged 40–55) and the younger (20–30) generation, respond to the changes in their socio-historical milieu. More particularly, this study wishes to answer these questions:

- Which historical and social processes influence the transformations in Jewish identities, and in what way?
- How do Jews, as individuals and as a community, cope with these changes in their environment?
- How does a sense of self as a Jew emerge, and how do Jews make sense of their world?
- What are the processes employed by Jews in maintaining their Jewish identities?
- How are their Jewish identities manifested?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Why Qualitative?

This study is a social research dealing with data about the social world. Within the empirical research, a distinction has been made between quantitative and qualitative, the

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<sup>12</sup> Hareven (1980: 225) pointed out that the Hebrew term *am behira* has been wrongly translated as “the chosen people”. As Hareven highlighted, the term means “people of the choice”, emphasising that Jewish people must make a conscious choice and are constantly faced with a choice to make.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, one cannot become Jewish overnight. According to *Halacha*, a person is a Jew if he was either born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism in accordance with strict and prescribed religious procedures (Herman, 1977). But, what I am referring to here is that *being* Jewish does not automatically mean possessing Jewish *identity*. One can indeed *be* Jewish, but not do anything about one’s Jewish identity. Having a Jewish *identity* means actively *working* on it, and that can be done through the individual’s own voluntary decision

former referring to research dealing with numbers, and the latter referring to research dealing with the interpretation of “social realities” that are unquantifiable (Bauer, Gaskell, Allum, 2000: 7). Qualitative research is a widely used methodology for data collection in the empirical social sciences (Gaskell, 2000). It is used in order to understand participants’ reality and the relations between participants and their social situation.

The present study is about how identities are constructed in the social context. It aims to investigate how participants construct their identities, how they think about and communicate the meanings of their identities *in their own terms* (Gervais and Jovchelovitch, 1998: 8, italics in original). The purpose is to understand the world of the participants, to relate it to particular social relations, and then interpret it within the given social context. For this reason, the present study refutes quantitative processes of measuring identity, such as on a scale of one to ten, since identity cannot be measured in “objective”, quantifiable terms. Also, considering the complexity, intensity and sensitivity of the issues involved, qualitative methods seem the most appropriate form of investigation, data collection and analysis.

The present research design consists of two different data sources: individual and group interviews. In total, 12 in-depth individual interviews were conducted, 6 of which being carried out with participants from the eldest generation of Croatian Jews (aged 70+) and 6 with the middle generation (aged 40–55). An equal number of male (3) and female (3) participants was interviewed from each generation.

Two group interviews were also conducted with the younger generation of Croatian Jews (aged 20–30). One group was made up of female participants (6 in total) while the other was exclusively male (also 6). Belonging to the same gender and origin, the participants were free to discuss and respond to each other, thus ensuring the flow of group discussions. The method proved to be an effective way of collecting a wide range of opinions, assessing the group dynamics, and replicating social realities.

#### 4. Results and Interpretation

The phenomena that emerge from this study are highly complex and so a simple description and presentation of results is not possible. Any attempt at categorisation would fail to depict the complexity and richness of the data. The results in this section are therefore represented on the basis of the extent to which they illuminate aspects of the research questions.

The analysis of the present data is primarily interpretive since it involves explaining and locating the participants’ worlds in relation to meaningful analytic frameworks. At the same time, the analysis is also phenomenological as it deals only with the participants’ own perceptions of events and processes responsible for identity construction, ignoring any objective statements about these events and processes (Smith et al., 1999).

Even though, and this is portrayed below, different dimensions of Jewish identities become more salient at different times, the overall finding is that Jewish identities are strongly developed among the Croatian Jewry, and the participants seem to be actively involved in an identity construction process.

#### 4.1 Domains of Transmission and Jewish Life in Zagreb

It is interesting to observe the spheres in which Jewish life in Croatia has been maintained and transmitted. As Hareven (1980) claims, Jewish identity cannot be maintained without a family and a community to cherish the Jewish way of life. Likewise, these two domains have been the most significant frameworks for the preservation of Jewish identity in Croatia. In reality, these domains need not be mutually exclusive.

##### Family as a Fundamental Unit of Jewishness

The first question put to all participants was to recall the first time they became conscious of being Jewish. How did they find out? Who told them? This question enabled the participants to express their personal experiences of Jewish life in a historical perspective. The participants from the older generation seemed to be a bit taken aback by the question because for them it was, as one male participant said, “a very natural cognisance within the family”. Indeed, the family was a fundamental unit for the eldest generation of Croatian Jews, the setting where their first encounter with Jewishness was experienced. It was within the family that the participants became conscious of being Jewish:

*I knew right away! Nobody had to tell me, these things were not told. Jewishness originated from my grandparents, they were a true Jewish family celebrating holidays, they kept kosher. Since I was there most of my childhood, I was kosher too. So, really, I knew from the beginning, since birth. (F1, older generation<sup>14</sup>)*

Notwithstanding the importance of the Jewish institutions that existed during the participants' childhood, especially the Jewish school where formal Jewish education was received, it was predominantly within the family that Jewish identity was formed and transmitted. Within this nuclear cell, family members interacted and influenced one another, transmitting knowledge, practices, values and beliefs.

*I was born into a Jewish family, and this family celebrated Jewish holidays and respected Jewish traditions. My mother would light two candles every Friday night. For Shabbat, she'd always bake a loaf, a barhes, which she'd cover with a cloth with a Hebrew inscription, and the whole family respected these customs ... Say, my grandpa and grandma. We used to visit them for Passover and have a Seder evening there. So, this was a Jewish tradition. I went to the synagogue on High Holydays ... (M1, older generation)*

Most of the pre-World War II Jewish families in Zagreb were traditional, i.e. they were not orthodox in a religious sense, as one participant herself noted “I was born into a Jewish family, already then very assimilated”. Although families differed in the extent of their religious observance, elementary symbols of Judaism were present within the families of all the older participants. Whether it was lighting candles and celebrating holidays, as noted above, or attending the synagogue and fasting as mentio-

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<sup>14</sup> In order to ensure participants' anonymity, I will use “F” to stand for female, and “M” for male along with ordinal numbers. I will also note which generation participants belong to when quoting them.

ned in other interviews, the fundamental elements of Jewishness were observed by the eldest generation. In the aforementioned “assimilated” family, birthdays were celebrated in a different way, but in the Jewish spirit: “In my family, we started celebrating birthdays on the eve of the birthday, because that is *erev*. We used to call this ‘*erev birthday*’”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, food, a special ethnic marker, was frequently recalled: *kosher*, *bar-hes*<sup>16</sup>, *matzos*<sup>17</sup>, chicken soup with *matzos* dumplings and similar traditional dishes also symbolised the existence of vibrant Jewish life within the nuclear family. This was the place where traditional and family narratives were told and shared through social interactions and communications, where an awareness of being Jewish and a sense of belonging was established. For the older participants, home was the place where Jewish identities emerged.

#### **From Family to the Jewish Community**<sup>18</sup>

Due to the external forces that influenced the course of Jewish life during and after World War II, especially the Holocaust and an increase in intermarriage, the family ceased to function as the basic unit of Jewish tradition and transmittance. As emphasised by half of the middle generation participants, they no longer realised their Jewishness within the family, but were informed from outside. It was largely in order to protect their children from the memory of the Holocaust that this “piece of information” was concealed.

*In primary school ... I was sitting with Đ. M. He was also a Jew ... And when the roll was called and everyone's nationality had to be entered in class, I declared myself as a Montenegrin, because I was born in Montenegro. He then intervened, as a 10-year old, ... he announced he was Jewish and said to the teacher that I wasn't Montenegrin, but that I was Jewish. This was practically my first encounter with Jewishness. Otherwise, at home we didn't talk about it much ... (M1, middle generation)*

It is precisely from such interaction with others outside their nuclear families that the participants encounter the internal family history and structure. It is no longer within the family that they realise their sense of belonging.

Gordiejew (1999) observed that individual Jews who wanted to pursue their Jewishness in post-World War II Yugoslavia were left only with the option to participate in the Community. Similarly, data from this study suggest that Jewish life shifts away from the household and towards the organised Jewish Community. The Community, then, becomes a viable unit and sphere of Jewish activity and expression. Although

<sup>15</sup> Every Jewish festivity is celebrated on its eve. So, for example, if the holiday falls on Tuesday, the celebration begins on Monday evening. In Hebrew, this is called *erev*.

<sup>16</sup> A special bread that is made for every Shabbat.

<sup>17</sup> Special food consumed for Passover.

<sup>18</sup> From here on, the Jewish Community Centre is referred to as “the Jewish Community” or “the Community”, as the participants themselves call it in their mother tongue.

there was no formal religious leadership, the Community members gathered regularly, especially for Jewish holidays, and celebrated them together:

*When I was younger, my mum would always tell me: today is Rosh Hashana, or Hanukah, or any other holiday, but we would go to the Community to celebrate with others ...* (M2, middle generation)

Even the participants from the eldest generation ceased to mark Jewish festivities at home:

\* Did you and your family celebrate Jewish holidays at home?

F1: *My grandparents, and my parents did, but then after WW II, when I got married, my husband and I and our children didn't. We always went to the Community celebrations ...* (older generation)

In a historical analysis of the former Soviet Union, a trend in “domestication of religion” during communist times was observed, referring to the shifting of religious practices from institutions to the home, from public to private (Dragadze, 1993, in Golbert, 1998). In the Jewish context in Croatia, however, no such transition ever took place since the family was no longer a practicable Jewish unit. Whereas other religions may have been practised in the secrecy of the home, the data from this study indicates that Jews in Zagreb ceased to enjoy Jewish life at home and instead turned to the Community where the transmittance of knowledge and practices occurred.

For both the middle and the younger generation, the Community becomes a place of social interaction and exchange of ideas, values and traditions. From these complex networks of social relationships arises a sense of oneself as a Jew, and a sense of belonging to a collectivity is established.

*I've known since I was born that I was Jewish, I knew all that, but in fact, this feeling of belonging was awoken by us hanging out together, especially in the Community, I think this is what contributed most to the fact that I can now say I'm Jewish and feel it.* (F3, group interview)

Thus, the Jews of Zagreb begin to define themselves as an extended family, and in this sense private and public spheres of religious and cultural transmission are permeated. The individual and the community are not clashing entities, but become “contradictory units working towards transcendence, rather than oppositions” (Howarth, 2001: 229).

### **Back to the Family?**

Although the younger generation actively participates in the Jewish life in the Community, some youthful voices express a desire for traditional forms of Jewishness that would take place at their future homes:

*I'd like to have a traditional family, celebrate holidays at home, fast on Yom Kippur with my husband, and I'd like to bring up my child in this spirit, to go to a Jewish kindergarten, a Jewish school...* (F2, group interview)

*I'd like one day, when I have children, for my wife and I to have Shabbat at home with them, at least one Friday evening a month. I'd like that.* (M1, group interview)

These young individuals are conscious of the significance the Jewish family has as a unit of transmission and identity formation and, although aware of the small number of potential Jewish spouses in Zagreb, would still like fundamental elements of Jewishness to be represented in their own homes.

### **Describing the Jewish Community**

Jews in Zagreb make sense of their identities through Community membership, participation and activities. “Defining one’s community and finding one’s position in it is precisely what constructing identities is about” (Gervais and Jovchelovitch, 1998: 22). The Jewish Community of Zagreb is the source of identity for local Jews; there, individual Jews vigorously interact with one another, constructing their identities through social interactions and relationships. In this study, the Community is often portrayed as a social niche, where one not only feels and expresses one’s Jewishness, but also feels safe and protected in doing so. One young male participant clearly states, “the Community is practically my second home.” Others confirm:

*M3: It’s important for me to know that I can always come to the Community and see a familiar face ... I consider it to be like an island you can go to, to escape from everyday problems and worries, a place where you can always come to ...*

*M5: And especially during the [recent] war, the Community was the place where I could feel good, because it was apolitical and we talked about other things, not just about the war ... (group interview)*

Middle generation participants recall socialising in the Community several decades ago:

*At one time, people used to come to the Community to watch television. There was a TV set at the Community, we didn’t have one at home. There was a large room at the Community where the television was, we knew exactly who sat where... We young ones were, as always, at the back, and the older people sat in front. This was our home, where we came regularly... you see, even to watch television. (F2, middle generation)*

Naturally, identifying oneself with others at the same time requires distinguishing oneself from others. In other words, establishing a sense of who one is means also establishing a sense of who one is not (Howarth, 2001). An awareness of one’s identity is inseparable from an awareness of one’s difference. Similarly, Arendt (1958) advocated that the community is something that evolves from the need to simultaneously belong and be different. The following quotation illustrates this point:

*[When I was younger] I didn’t really understand what it means to be Jewish. I just knew it was something different ... because on a Sunday, I would go to the Community while my friends from school would go to church ... (M4, group interview)*

Accordingly, being Jewish means going to the Community and partaking in the activities on a Sunday, but it also means not going to church. The emphasis on distinguishing oneself from others as a vital aspect in the formations of Jewish identities is abundantly present in this study.

## 4.2 External Determinants Influencing Identities of Jews in Zagreb

In order to fully comprehend the transformations of Jewish identities among the Jews of Zagreb, the dynamics of external forces in the form of historical and socio-political processes must be explored. Identities cannot be understood without history, and the Jews of Zagreb share many common narratives and experiences. Also, Jewish identities should be understood as historically and socially constructed in response to these circumstances.

### **Anti-Semitism : the Realities of the Holocaust**

*Jews often do not think they are Jews, they are ordinary citizens, but they are made to be Jews by the anti-Semites who do not recognise them as equal citizens, they make Jews feel like Jews, do you know what I mean...? (M1, older generation)*

Anti-Semitism has a major role to play in determining Jewish identity, both as a force operative in contemporary society and as the memory of the Holocaust. Webber (1994) placed the Holocaust at the centre of any definition of Jewishness and identity, and this is confirmed by the narratives of Jews in Zagreb. It is evident from the present data that the memory of the Holocaust, as an extreme form of anti-Semitism, is the main factor for the eldest generation, and a background factor for the middle generation in the stimulation of Jewish consciousness.

The eldest generation participants have been directly affected by the cruel realities of the Holocaust, which has fundamentally shaped their lives and identities. For these participants, the Holocaust was the force that infringed on their personal realities and imposed discontinuities on their personal narratives.

*When I came back to Zagreb after four years of war captivity, I realised that no one was here. That was the first time I cried. From my whole family, I was left alone ... (M1, older generation)*

*I recall the date my childhood was brought to an end... It was April 13, 1941. As I walked out of the house, my father asked me: where are you going? I said: out, to play. And at the time, the tanks were already in the city ... He looked at me and saw I was a child, and he said: go. When I came back, he wasn't home. At that moment I realised: while I was playing, they came to take him ... And he never came back ... (M3, older generation)*

In order to preserve their existence, these Jews must re-construct their self-identities and must restore the continuities in their self-narratives. The genesis of self-narratives, although possessed by individuals, is fundamentally social (Gergen and Gergen, 1983). It is precisely the maintenance of the narrative that is central to developing a sense of self-identity. In relation to their private lives, it is the unique experience of the Holocaust that marks the core of the participants' Jewish identities. Hence, the Holocaust, as the focal representation of Jewish tragedy, makes them Jewish.

The Holocaust is also represented as the shared experience that unites all the Jews. It is a tragic part of one's own history but it is also the momentum that radically

affected the universal history of Jewish peoplehood. In Giddens' terms, self-identity narratives are reflexively understood in terms of one's own biography, but in this case they are also understood in terms of global Jewish history and memory. This presumes continuities in Jewish identities across time and space. Solidarity with other victims, a common fate, collective memory and shared experiences are themes frequently present in this study with regard to the Holocaust.

*I think that all Jews, regardless of whether they are believers or not, are connected to Jewishness. You know, they feel Jewish precisely because of the Holocaust, because to deny this would mean to mock all those victims. The memory of them. The remembrance of them. So, although I'm not religious, I feel Jewish and I always declare that I'm a Jew... because of the Holocaust. The Holocaust connects all Jews. Because that was terrible. An unspeakable, terrible thing. (M1, older generation)*

Born after World War II, the middle generation participants were raised in the shadow of the Holocaust. As mentioned above, to some participants the fact that they were Jewish was concealed, perhaps in order to protect them, but these individuals soon learned the fate of their family and their nation. To others, the realities of the Holocaust were continuously narrated:

*My mother would make me listen to what happened to our family. I would always try to run away or cover my ears, I couldn't listen to it, I couldn't bear it ... But she wanted me to know what happened, she wanted me to know how our family perished ... (M2, middle generation)*

For the middle generation, while the Holocaust represents the burden they had to live with, it also brings a trait of distinctiveness that reinforces their sense of Jewishness.

*I think that it is precisely my generation, as an Israeli psychoanalyst nicely puts it, who are "a memory of candles". My generation is a memory of candles for all those who vanished in the Holocaust. In us, they saw the children who vanished, and the adults who vanished, we were named after those who vanished, and told we looked like this late person, and you remind me of that late person, and you walk just like, I don't know, this aunt... When someone carries, I wouldn't say the load, but the horrific feeling that from this tree which had, I don't know, 70 leaves and branches, 54 are missing just because they were Jewish, I think this is not enough for one generation, it's not enough that we are candles. You have to take this flame on. (F1, middle generation)*

It appears that the Holocaust as an imposed method of singling out Jews heightens participants' sense of belonging and their sense of self as Jews. The consciousness of this historical event differentiates oneself as a Jew and increases the Jewish dimension in one's self-identity.

The theme of the Holocaust was raised only once among the young Jews of Zagreb. Interestingly, it was mentioned in relation to the present situation and the future life of Jews in Zagreb:

*As far as our survival is concerned, I doubt that the Community will ever be extinguished, because if it wasn't extinguished after the Holocaust in 1945, I doubt*

*that it will ever be extinguished, and in this period you know yourself how many Jews from Zagreb were killed and disappeared... (M1, group interview)*

Obviously, the awareness and knowledge of the Holocaust is unquestionable; the participants also show no denial or repression of the actual existence of these events. Gudonis (2001) reported similar findings in the study of Jewish identity in post-communist Poland, where young Polish Jews rarely emphasised the Holocaust as the fundamental element of Jewishness. Gudonis concluded that awareness of the Holocaust is no longer limited to the Jews themselves, and awareness of the event per se is a poor differentiator to young generations with regard to their Jewishness. Perhaps the same can be applied to young Croatian Jews, who no longer perceive the Holocaust, or anti-Semitism, as a major threat to their survival or as a major force in their identification and differentiation.

#### **Communism :being Jewish in Yugoslavia**

Communism was another external force that affected the re-shaping of Jewish identities. One result of the Holocaust was a drastic decline in the demographics of the Jewish population in the territory of the former Yugoslavia; most Jews either perished in the war or left for Israel. An increase in intermarriage was a natural consequence. Another result was the birth of ambition among Jews to try and integrate into society, which prevented them from standing out. In Communist Yugoslavia, Jews could not to be singled out as the State advocated equality among its nations and nationalities.

*Yugoslavia, socialist or communist, tried to wipe out national differences. I'd say, not stress them, and not only not stress them, but also suppress them a little. So, it was not appropriate to say I'm a Jew, I'm a Croat... although it wasn't kept secret... Because the whole partisan war was led under the motto, which sounds ridiculous today – Brotherhood and Unity. (M3, older generation)*

Also, in communist Yugoslavia, the norms of society were such that Jews felt they could free themselves of the stigma imposed on them by the Holocaust. The Jews in the former Yugoslavia did not need to partake in stigma management (Goffman, 1963), in order to conceal or minimise the unpleasant consequences imposed on them by the tragic events of the Holocaust. In such a setting, Jews could feel unthreatened:

*You didn't have to pretend that you had nothing to do with what happened in the past to your family, you were neither made responsible nor given credit for what happened in the past and to your family. (F1, middle generation)*

Communist Yugoslavia never emphasised religious distinctions; practising religion was not prohibited, but neither was it popular. The circumstances were such that Jews actively chose not to be observant. They were recognised as equal by the communist society, and in return supported the governmental regime. Being a Jewish atheist was not considered a contradiction in terms; also, being Jewish was quite compatible with being communist. Jews were consciously supportive of life in a society that declared no ethnic and religious discriminations and divisions.

*This communist government... didn't consider religion to be important, you know. And as they didn't look very kindly upon the Catholic Church, they didn't*

*look very kindly upon the Jews either; they considered all religions to be unimportant... (M1, older generation)*

Some researchers, for instance Amyot and Sigelman (1996), in their study on the Jewish identity in the United States, concluded that lowered levels of religiosity are associated with a weaker sense of Jewish identity. As witnessed by the participants in this study, such conclusions cannot be applied to the case of Jewish identities in Croatia. True, Jews in Croatia did experience a decline in religiosity, but this decline did not result in a weaker sense of Jewish identity. Instead, secular components of Jewish identities became salient, which suited both Jews and communists in those times. As indicated above, the Jewish Community became the arena of Jewish expression wherein knowledge and values were shared and festivities celebrated. It was the significance of togetherness that characterised Community celebrations more than religious observance. Festivities were not commemorated according to firm religious procedures, but Jews nevertheless gathered in order to rejoice together, to remember together, and to sustain Jewish life and tradition together. Despite the repression of Orthodox religious practice, the Jews of Zagreb were not torn away from their historic and national roots.

*We observed Hanukah and Purim, these were like the “most innocent”, the “most unreligious” holidays. But, of course, we didn’t really know what Hanukah was. [When I was a child] I always thought of Hanukah as a partisan fight against the stronger German enemy, a small bunch of brave soldiers that overpowered and won against some huge army. (F3, middle generation)*

*It was important for us to keep the tradition. We were singing the Israeli songs, those were the religious songs, but we were singing them as if they were Israeli, as something that is a part of our tradition that should not be forgotten... (F1, middle generation)*

### **Croatian Nationalism : Living through Changes**

The transition from communist to post-communist Yugoslavia resulted in social upheaval. The rise in national consciousness and intensified feelings of belonging to an ethnic group characterised the early 1990s in Croatia. The construction of post-Yugoslav Jewish identities can be properly understood only in terms of the impact of nationalism within the region. Similar observations were made by researchers investigating constructions of Jewish identities in other post-communist countries (Chervyakov et al., 1997; Golbert, 1998; Gudonis, 2001; Kovacs, 1994).

Jews, like other nations in the former Yugoslavia, were deeply affected by the outbreak of war in 1991. The rise in national consciousness and strengthening of Croatian national identity, evident in the restoration of Ustasha symbols, reminded the eldest participants of the persecutions experienced in 1941. Many were genuinely afraid and offended.

*In 1991 we were scared... frightened. I think that at that time both the Jews and the Serbs saw the New Croatia in a similar way, based on the experiences of 1941. (F1, eldest generation)*

After an initial period of fear and uncertainty, the Jews interviewed in this study admit that they did not experience any actual discrimination or anti-Semitic incidents during the recent war. Many of them emphasise that, this time, the enemy was the Serbs, and not the Jews. Drawing from World War II experiences, however, Jews felt solidarity and empathy with the victims, and were critical of the war circumstances. It is clear from these narratives that the war brought anxiety and disappointment among some Jews.

*I know what it means for a country to be independent and I support it, I was born and lived here ... But I couldn't identify with the desire of this [Croatian] nation to achieve independence in such a way... (F3, middle generation)*

The middle generation participants, born and raised in communist Yugoslavia, felt that their patriotic identity was under threat; it was their homeland that was disintegrating and disappearing, as one female participant notes:

*One of the things that makes me deeply unhappy is that I've lost my homeland. The Croats got one, and I've lost mine. I lived in Yugoslavia, and had friends all over Yugoslavia. They were all Jews. And the way we lived, it was wonderful... (F2, middle generation)*

With the rise of Croatian national identity and the Croatian commitment to nationalistic ideals, Jews were faced with a decision to make as to who they were. Identification with Croatian nationalism was impossible, as illustrated above. Nor could they any longer be Yugoslav Jews, for there was no Yugoslavia. Many experienced struggles and uncertainties in realising who they were and where they belonged. The disintegration of Yugoslavia caused many Croatian Jews to reconsider their identities and, as a result, a reawakening of Jewish identity occurred (Kerkkänen, 2001). Jews who were engaged in Community activities before the outbreak of the war, predominantly continued to do so. Some participants recall attending the Community more frequently due to the war and dealing with the war crisis in an active and constructive way:

*Before the war, I was less active in the Community because of the job I had and family obligations. But, with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, I had a need to do something in order to sustain Jewish life here ... since the territory is too small for us to be dispersed. In that way it was easier for me to surmount the difficulties of the war... (F1, middle generation)*

It was particularly the young generation of Jews who experienced difficulties in identification, since most of them were either very young when the war broke out or had not been confronted with the dilemma before. The following exemplifies how they struggled with this issue:

*F4: I knew I was Jewish, but never until I was in the second, third form of secondary school did I have any contact with it... My mum is Jewish, my dad is of Orthodox religion and no one in the house is a believer. And then 1991 happened, and everything that happened in 1991. We were all confused, and we had to decide who you were, what you were... I couldn't decide... And then my mum persuaded me to go to the Community and I stayed there, this is what I decided.*

F3: *I remember that year [1991] there was a census, and my mum and dad asked me who I want to be. I was 12, and that was the hardest decision I had to mak ... (group interview)*

These young Jews, faced with dislocated experiences in their lives, need to find their place in the new society. They have to rebuild their identities in order to assure continuities in their existence. It appears that they are actively involved in the construction of, and the quest for, their self-identities. By deciding, they actively announce who they are and look for their place in this world. For them, this quest becomes a “reflexive project”, as suggested by Giddens (1991).

#### 4.3 Contemporary Expressions of Jewish Identities in Zagreb

Identity is an activity that arises from social interaction and exchange. It can be envisioned as emerging out of a dialectical relationship between the self and society, and is manifested through social actions. This section presents different forms of expression of Jewish identities in Croatia, out of which identities develop.

##### Social Interactions

Examples of social interactions among the participants within the Jewish context are abundant in this study. It appears that Jewish identities predominantly emerge from these social contacts. It is from relationships with others in the Jewish settings that self-awareness as a Jew occurs. The older generation participants recall partaking in the Zionist-socialist youth movement *Hashomer Hatzair* and others, where they received a (largely non-religious) education and interacted with one another:

*We had excursions, lectures, we spent time together... I learned a lot about [Jewish] history and literatur ... We were friends, cared one for another, helped one another, loved one another, those were true friendships... (F1, eldest generation)*

The *Hashomer Hatzair* organisation no longer exists, but the themes of friendship, spending time together, interacting and learning are uniform across all the interviews. Most of the interactions take place within the Jewish Community in Zagreb or in other Jewish settings, such as Jewish summer camps on the Adriatic coast. It is evident from the interviews that Jews regularly spend time together in the Jewish Community. During that time, they communicate, interact, and exchange knowledge and experiences.

*We'd meet every day at the Jewish Community, but we mostly used to play games together, [we received] less education from the middle and older generation, but mostly the Jews got together. (M1, middle generation)*

Often, they are involved in doing something creative and constructive. During the interactions, individual Jews rehearse and prepare for performances that are presented on special occasions, such as Jewish holidays.

*We met in the Community every Thursday and our gatherings were mostly centred on preparing for performances that we would give for Hanukah, and as soon as*

*Hanukah<sup>19</sup> finished, we started preparing for Purim<sup>20</sup> ... And so it went, every year. (M2, middle generation)*

Although these performances have biblical themes and are thus religiously based, it is the cultural and social dimensions that are predominant in these interactions. Similarly, Kerkkänen in his study of post-Yugoslav Jewry noted that the religious dimension of Jewish identity declined and the *cultural residue* came to the fore; it is through the participation in the Jewish Community that the Jewish identity of Croatian Jews is being crystallised (2001: 195).

Further, participants often mention spending time in Jewish summer camps and on similar excursions.

*Every summer we went to the summer camp where we would stay for 2–3 weeks. Someone from Israel would come who would teach us Israeli songs and dances, give us lectures on the history of our nation, usually about the Holocaust but much more about the land of Israel ... There was no Shabbat, no candle lighting, but we were together... (F3, middle generation)*

*My memories from the summer camp are the dearest memories to me. We sang Jewish songs, danced, learned about Israel, everything was in a Jewish spirit, but best of all were the people there, we had such great times... (F2, group interview)*

Out of these interactions and common experiences, friendships develop that become deeply meaningful for these Jews.

*I'd say that 80 per cent of my best friends are Jews. And these are the people I trust most ... I come to the Community primarily for the people. I made my best friends there, that's for sure. (M1, group interview)*

Through common interactions, either in the form of leisure activities or doing something constructive, the Jews of Zagreb create their realities. They are involved in “games” and “plays” from which their sense of belonging is established. In Mead’s terms (1934), during these social interactions, an individual Jew becomes aware of the attitudes of other Jews in his immediate environment towards himself and attempts to view himself from the standpoint of those others. He also takes his own attitudes and the attitudes of others towards the common goal, such as a stage performance, and out of these complex interactions his self-consciousness as a Jew arises. The self emerges out of the interactions of individuals in the social matrix; the Jewish self (or identity) arises out of the interactions with other Jews in their common Jewish milieu.

## **Religion**

*F3: I was born to an Orthodox family, a very religious home, we lived according to strict religious laws, keeping kosher and observing all the holidays ... But me and my sister opposed this very strongly ...*

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<sup>19</sup> A Jewish holiday that usually falls in December.

<sup>20</sup> A Jewish holiday that usually falls in March.

\* Can you tell me why?

F3: *Because we couldn't enjoy our youth the same as other children. They went on excursions, trips, camping. We weren't allowed to do any of those things because we were kosher and we couldn't eat, because we'd honour the Shabbat and we weren't allowed to g ... (older generation)*

This participant is a rare example of Jewish Orthodox descent in Croatia, since the majority of pre- and especially post-World War II Jewish families were not religious. She clearly highlights the practical problems of being religious in a contemporary society where Jews are a small minority. Other older participants, raised in Reform and traditional families, and middle generation participants, raised in a socialist-communist spirit, believe that being Jewish does not exclusively mean being religious. Their own narratives confirm that a non-religious upbringing does not result in a loss of Jewish consciousness. Many are aware of the relevance religion plays in the sustenance of Jewish life and identity.

*Religion is an integral part of the Jewish identity, and I don't possess that piece in the mosaic of Jewish identity. This mosaic is very varied and rich, but this not-so-small piece, which ... is very important, I don't possess. I haven't had a real opportunity to familiarise myself with the Jewish religion and it'd be ridiculous for me today to become a believer, I'm too experienced now. (M1, middle generation)*

For some, religion becomes an important element as they discover new ideas and dimensions.

*I am a believer, I wasn't raised as a believer but I am happy now because I discover phenomenal things ... I don't regret things I did or didn't do before, but I think my life would have been fuller and I would have understood more if I was a believer. But, there's still time... (F1, middle generation)*

For most participants, however, Judaism plays a small role in their conceptions of Jewish consciousness. The observance of religious rituals becomes a matter of symbolic manifestations, such as candle lighting or fasting. The participants seem to be attracted to Judaism in terms of its historical relevance, memory, and traditional customs, and are genuinely interested in learning more about Jewish tradition and culture. Generally speaking, to be Jewish in Croatia does not mean to practise Judaism.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival of the Orthodox rabbi to Zagreb in 1998 brought a significant change to Jewish life. Jews in Croatia today have an opportunity to learn and observe Orthodox Judaism, something that had not been practised since pre-World War II times, and even then only to a small extent. One male participant captures the realities of religious Jewish life in Croatia today:

*I think that the arrival of the rabbi is a turning point for us. A rabbi is not so important for the continuation of a Jewish community, and we are an example of*

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<sup>21</sup> This sentence paraphrases Chervyakov et al. on research into Jewish identities in Russia. In their research, it was found that “[to] be Jewish in Russia does not mean to practice Judaism” (1997: 293).

*a community that persisted without a rabbi for a long time. But, for a community's deeper preservation, deeper affiliation, the role of a rabbi is very significant. Honestly, we would have maintained our Community even if the rabbi hadn't arrived. However, he contributes considerably to the quality of Jewish life, and to the possibility to belong to Jewishness on a deeper level. If you choose. And you choose what you want ... (M2, middle generation)*

### **Cultural Manifestations**

It appears from the present data that the cultural dimension of Jewish identities is particularly salient. The evidence can be found in the Community's massive publishing output:

*The religious dimension is certainly weaker, but the cultural is strong, because our Community produced a great deal of culture. Perhaps in the whole world you won't be able to find such a small community that has published so many books and magazines. There isn't ... if you can find a community with a thousand Jews, you certainly won't find that many books, so many of their own magazines as you can with the Jews in Zagreb ... (M3, older generation)*

Out of the many cultural activities in the Jewish Community in Zagreb, an Israeli folk dancing group has a significant affect on young Jews of Zagreb:

*[By partaking in the festival of cultural minorities in Croatia] we show that we're here, because there aren't many of us, but we're here, and we love that, and through some kind of cultural event we show that we're here. I don't know, for me personally culture is one of the most crucial elements through which I show Jewishness. For me, it's not so important to go to the synagogue, for me it's important to dance Jewish dances because this is definitely the best way in which I can express my Jewishness. (F3, group interview)*

This type of activity is a process wherein participants not only learn how to dance, but are in direct contact with Jewish music and culture. More importantly, these participants are in direct contact with one another, and they are actively engaged in socialising. Like the performances for holidays described above, the dance group is a social act out of which a sense of Jewishness develops. It is through these interactions that Jews of Zagreb make sense of their realities.

### **The Emotional Dimension of Jewishness**

Being Jewish is often described as "feeling" Jewish by the participants in this study. However, these participants find it hard to describe exactly how and what they feel. The feeling is usually related to a particular event in their own narrative:

*I remember once when I was in Germany, I went to visit the synagogue. It was Simhat Torah<sup>22</sup>, and the way I experienced it then, it was something remarkable ... I can't describe the feeling I had, but I felt it deep inside. I felt like I'm*

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<sup>22</sup> A Jewish holiday celebrating the Torah.

*a part of it, I felt like I belong, and I was shivering inside ...* (F5, group interview)

An emotional dimension is often mentioned in relation to feelings of belonging to the Jewish peoplehood, having a “connection” based on a common history and shared experiences. Indeed, this “connection” is clearly demonstrated in the following quotation:

*Gentiles have history, something that happened to them through history. Jews don't have history but they've got memory, collective memory. So, the exodus from Egypt didn't happen to someone else, it happened to my family ... With gentiles this doesn't exist, someone else was somewhere and did something. Jews have a collective memory, that is, a family, while other peoples simply have history... For instance, every year we sit around the table and talk about how we got out of Egypt all those years ago. And you're told to listen and feel as if you were exiled from Egypt, that this wasn't someone else, but you.* (M4, group interview)

Emotions are also connected with the use of typically “Jewish” languages: Yiddish, Ladino and Hebrew. During the interviews, participants occasionally used phrases in these languages, the eldest generation mostly in Yiddish, and the younger generation in Hebrew. Some of the young participants express a desire to learn Hebrew in order to be “connected to the original source”, as one male participant says. Language is a “significant symbol”, as defined by Mead (1934), that enables the individual to interpret the attitudes of others towards oneself, and renders the reflexive objectification of the self. It is from the act of communication that the meaning arises, a meaning from which the Jews of Zagreb construct their world.

*We are Sephardim, and my parents spoke Ladino and this is the language I grew up with, when I hear it, I hear something very close to me, something very meaningful and dear ...* (F2, middle generation)

Emotions are also related to Israel, and the feeling of “connection” with Israel is often mentioned in these interviews. Most of the participants have visited Israel, some have lived there, or have family and friends there, so the link is clear. But these participants also feel a deeper sense of belonging to Israel and are personally affected by its realities:

*I feel completely connected to Israel, and when I see on TV what's happening there I know it affects me much more than some non-Jews watching the same news. At times I feel I should be there, just to give support ...* (F5, group interview)

There are copious examples of the emotional dimension in Jewish identities in the interviews. Feelings are related to notions of family, language, history, ancestry, common fate, and the future. Moreover, they are connected to feelings of pride and a desire to emphasise one's sense of belonging, as one middle generation female says, “I always try to find a way to emphasise that I'm Jewish to people I meet for the first time.”

The feelings of belonging and sharing are emotionally connected to historical roots, demonstrating that Jewish identities transcend time and space. They are mobilised as a tool linking the past, present and future. Jewish identities encompass a time dimension,

and, as one older female participant says, “time is a spiral connecting the past and the present. It can't be broken.”

## **5. Conclusions and Implications**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to present constructions in, and to investigate transformations of, Jewish identities among the Jews of Zagreb. The study shows that the Jews of Zagreb are active participants in their identity construction and have strongly developed their Jewish identities. Having been exposed to external forces that threaten the maintenance of their sense of selves as Jews, the participants in this study reveal that their Jewish self-identity is a continuous individual and collective pursuit. Influenced by outside factors, especially the Holocaust, the communist regime and the rise of national consciousness in Croatia, Jews re-establish and negotiate a sense of continuity in their own self-narratives, and relate it to the self-narratives of others in their environment. The Jews of Zagreb demonstrate an understanding of the social context in which they live and are aware of the categorisations of the “self” and “other”, which is crucial for identity construction. Historical transitions significantly influence spheres in Jewish life and manifestations of Jewish identities. As demonstrated, a family as a Jewish unit ceases to function and the Jewish Community becomes a vehicle in preserving Jewish identities. By participating and interacting, the Jews of Zagreb locate themselves in relation to others and make sense out of their realities. Their Jewish self-identity is a quest they actively embark on. A sense of self as a Jew develops from social interactions and meaningful relationships.

This study shows that identity is a social phenomenon; it is a dynamic process, influenced by historical and socio-political changes, and can be understood only in relation to its social milieu. It also demonstrates that identities do not exist *sui generis*, but are created and re-constructed on a daily basis. They are highly sensitive to transformations in the historical and societal context, and any study investigating social identities should take these processes into account.

### **5.2 Methodological Implications**

This study is a qualitative study using open-ended interviews. It demonstrates that this type of research provides a wealth of information and reveals how participants make sense of their own worlds. The data in this study were approached by triangulation, i.e. the incorporation of individual and group interviews across three different generations and the use of the researcher's knowledge of local phenomena. This method elicits a diverse spectrum of information and renders a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. The study also acknowledges both the advantages and disadvantages in using a researcher who shares a common background with her participants. A clear awareness on the part of the researcher about her role and potential biases can reduce possible subjectivity during the process of collecting and analysing the data. In such a case, the researcher can demonstrate both a critical stance and empathy.

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## ŽIDOVSKI IDENTITETI U HRVATSKOJ – SOCIOLOŠKO-PSIHOLOŠKI ASPEKT

### SAŽETAK

Težište ovog rada je na načinu na koji zagrebački Židovi gledaju na sebe i svoj svijet. U radu se istražuje kako su povijesne i društveno-političke promjene utjecale na transformacije u židovskim identitetima te kako tri naraštaja hrvatskih Židova koji žive u Zagrebu, stariji (70 godina i stariji), srednji (starosti 40–55 godina) i mladi (u dobi od 20–30 godina) reagiraju na promjene u svom društvenom okruženju. Istraživanje počiva na premisi da se identitet ne može oblikovati u izolaciji, nego se njegova pojava i razvoj mogu postići jedino putem socijalnih interakcija. Usaden u povijesni i socijalni kontekst, identitet se tretira kao rezultat interakcije između pojedinca i njegove okoline u kojoj je pojedinac aktivni sudionik. Ovo kvalitativno istraživanje, temeljeno na individualnim intervjuima (sa starijim i srednjim naraštajem) i grupnim intervjuima (s mladim naraštajem) pokazuje da zagrebački Židovi aktivno sudjeluju u stvaranju svojega identiteta. Pod utjecajem vanjskih činilaca, poglavito holokausta, komunističkog režima i uspona hrvatske nacionalne svijesti, Židovi raspravljaju o osjećaju identiteta preko svojih vlastitih priča povezujući ih s pričama drugih u svom okruženju. Osjećaj samoga sebe kao Židova razvija se iz socijalne interakcije i sadržajnih odnosa.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: identitet, socijalni identitet, suvremena socijalna psihologija, Židovi, Hrvatska, kvalitativano istraživanje

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## IDENTITES JUIVES EN CROATIE : PERSPECTIVE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGIQUE

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite le regard que portent les Juifs de Zagreb sur eux-mêmes et leur monde. L'auteur étudie comment les changements historiques et socio-politiques ont influé sur les transformations survenues dans les identités juives et comment trois générations de Juifs croates vivant à Zagreb - les plus âgés (70 ans et plus), ceux d'âge moyen (40–55 ans) et les jeunes (de 20 à 30 ans) - réagissent aux changements dans leur milieu social. L'étude s'appuie sur la prémisse que l'identité ne peut pas se composer dans l'isolation, mais ne peut émerger et se développer qu'à travers l'interaction sociale. Ancrée dans le contexte historique et social, l'identité est traitée comme un résultat de l'interaction entre l'individu et son environnement, dont il est un participant actif. Cette recherche qualitative, étayée sur des interviews individuelles (avec la génération âgée et celle d'âge moyen) et des interviews de groupe (avec la jeune génération) montre que les Juifs de Zagreb participent activement à la création de leur identité. Sous l'influence de facteurs extérieurs, plus particulièrement l'Holocauste, le régime communiste et la montée de la conscience nationale croate, les Juifs traitent du sentiment d'iden-

tité à travers leurs propres récits, en les mettant en rapport avec les autres récits de leur entourage. Le sentiment de soi-même en tant que Juif se développe à partir de l'interaction sociale et de relations constructives.

MOTS CLÉS : identité, identité sociale, psychologie sociale contemporaine, Juifs, Croatie, recherche qualitative