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Reconstructing Jewish Communities and Jewish Identities in Post-Communist East Central Europe

The communist era left the Jews of East Central Europe with a varied legacy, but what they have had in common since 1990 is the ability to choose whether and how to identify as Jews and to reconstruct public Jewish life. They do not do so in isolation, but are influenced both by the societies and states in which they live and by world Jewry and Israel. Ultimately, the choices are theirs, but they are shaped by these external actors. The major issues to be resolved are the nature of Jewish identity and its meaning; how to relate to the post-communist states, their neighbors, world Jewry and the State of Israel; how to deal with the communist past and those who shaped public Jewish life in that period; the restitution of public and private Jewish properties; and the seemingly perennial issue of anti-Semitism.

In the course of half a century (1939–1989) the great majority of Jews in East Central Europe were murdered, and the majority of those who survived were deprived of their Judaism and Jewishness. Unlike the Nazis, the communists did not try to destroy Jews, but their policies of official atheism and forced acculturation seriously eroded Judaism and Jewish identity, though the latter was kept alive in most East Central European societies by social and governmental anti-Semitism. Unlike the Soviet state, communist states in Eastern Europe did not identify Jews officially as such on their internal passports, but they kept records which allowed them to identify Jews. Moreover, in Poland, Romania, Hungary and perhaps in parts of Czechoslovakia, whether one was Jewish or not seemed to matter a great deal to segments of the non-Jewish population who imputed Jewish identity to people, often with no basis in fact. The tendency has been to exaggerate the number of Jews. Thus, for example, in a representative sample of 1,014 Poles questioned in 1992, 23 per cent said there were “many” or “very many” Jews living in Poland, while a third said there were several tens of thousands (16 per cent) or several hundred thousand (14 per cent), this at a time when the most generous estimate was that there were 10,000 Jews, acknowledged and not, in the country.¹

Since 1989 it has become possible to recreate Jewish life everywhere in the region and for individuals to claim or reclaim Jewishness and practice Judaism. As has often been remarked of Jews elsewhere, Jewish identity in Eastern Europe has become a matter of choice, as has communal reconstruction. On both the individual and communal levels some have chosen to ignore the new opportunities. Others have sought merely to memorialize a Jewish past, while still others have been trying to revive and fill with meaning their personal and collective Jewishness. Revival is a daunting task. Aside from the material and logistical challenges involved, there is the problem of determining what a meaningful Jewishness can be in the highly specific context of post-communist East Central Europe. If the past is to be a guide, there were two general models of Jewishness in pre-communist East Central Europe: the East European (Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian, Slovak) model of a group which is both ethnic or national and religious, and the Central European model (Hungarian, Czech) notion of Jewishness as religion primarily. Of course, these types should be treated as a spectrum, with various mixes possible, and in each country more than one model and mix of models existed.

¹ Survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University, and the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, reported in H. Datner and M. Melchior, ‘Jews in Contemporary Poland—Absence and Returns’ (unpublished paper, n.d.), p. 8. See also *Czy Polacy są Antysemitami? Wyniki Badania Sondażowego* (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1996) and J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs and A. Orla-Bukowska, ‘After the Fall: Attitudes Toward Jews in Post-1989 Poland’, *Nationalities Papers*, 26/2 (June 1998), pp. 265–82.

An ethnic group is a “social group whose members share a sense of common origins, claim a common and distinctive history and destiny, possess one or more distinctive characteristics, and feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity.”² The “distinctive characteristic” or the “epitome of peoplehood”³ is usually language, kinship patterns, or religion. In the Jewish case, religion has been the most distinctive characteristic. However, certainly in the modern period one may be a non-believer and a Jew, though it is unlikely that one can be an active practitioner of a religion other than Judaism and still be considered by other Jews as a Jew.⁴ Therefore, one must distinguish between Judaism and Jewish ethnicity, or, simply, Jewishness. For the individual, Jewishness is the sense, the belief that one is Jewish.

Ethnic groups are defined by both content—what they share—and boundaries—the extent of the group, who is in it and who is not. Both the content of being Jewish and the boundaries of Jewishness have shifted over time. Originally, Jewishness was based on a fusion of what we call today kinship, religion and ethnicity. Later, religion and ethnicity became disaggregated and differentiated. Kinship could be fictive and symbolic. The content of Jewishness became differentiated in multiple modern versions. While religion, Judaism, was the dominant marker of Jewishness for many centuries, the rise of secularism and the disaggregation of religious and ethnic identities allowed for a recasting of Jewishness into ethnic and national terms.

For the most part, communist rule did away with the content of being Jewish, and whereas the Soviet system carefully preserved ethnic boundaries through the official identification of each citizen by his or her ethnicity, East Central European regimes did not do so. Therefore, the boundaries between Jews and others were blurred more than in the USSR. Moreover, in Central Europe, as well as in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, Jews had been more acculturated and even assimilated in the pre-communist period than those in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, ethnic re-identification is possible. As András Kovács observes,

A group with a specific ethnic identity is separated from the other groups by the boundary that divides them and not necessarily by what that boundary encloses . . . The gradual diminution . . . of (ethnic) habits, preferences, and practices is likely to weaken ethnic identity. . . . but that identity may later be awakened or determined by a totally different set of factors.⁵

Another difference between the USSR and East Central Europe is that only in Poland and Romania was there before the war a “thick” cultural alternative to religion (Judaism). Yiddish culture, with its rich array of newspapers, theaters, books, journals, summer camps, schools, youth groups, and other institutions did not exist in Hungary and the Czech lands. In those countries there were very high rates of intermarriage and assimilation, as Jews passed out of

² A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 66.

³ R. A. Schermerhorn, *Comparative Ethnic Relations* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 12.

⁴ I have in mind, of course, the case of the late Brother Daniel (Oswald Rufeisen), a Jewish-born Carmelite monk who wanted to acquire Israeli citizenship under the “Law of Return”, which grants it automatically to Jews, on the ground that his ethnicity (nationality) was Jewish while his religion was Catholic. The Israeli Supreme Court rejected the claim, arguing that historically the conventional understanding of being Jewish excluded practice of a non-Jewish faith, though it did not preclude non-belief. The court ruled that “Judaism is a status [sic; I have not seen the original but surmise that *yahadut* is being translated as Judaism, a faith, whereas it seems to mean ‘Jewishness’ in this context]; and status is indivisible . . . The basic attitude, that ‘Jew’ and ‘Christian’ are two mutually exclusive titles, is shared by all, whether it be the mass of the people or the scholars; none of these can consider an apostate as a member of the Jewish nation.” Supreme Court Decision 72/62, in *Israel in the Middle East*, ed. I. Rabinovich and J. Reinharz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 153. The same logic would seem to apply in the more troubling case of “Jews for Jesus”.

⁵ A. Kovács, ‘Changes in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary’, in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. J. Webber (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), p. 159.

Jewish identity to become fully Hungarian or Czech—or at least they thought they had. Yiddish culture was revived, albeit on an immeasurably smaller scale, in both Poland and Romania and was supported by the communist regimes. Ironically, however, by the 1960s the religious establishment won out over their secular Yiddish rivals in Romania and, through the person of Chief Rabbi Moses Rosen, became the favored and almost the only legitimate institutional expression of Jewishness. Religious activity or at least affiliation became the only route to communal power. In Poland, the secular Yiddishists were favored by the government, but they suffered more than the religionists in the purge of 1968–69, and led a shadow existence thereafter.

In Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia there had been no Yiddish mass culture and the major secular alternative had been Zionism, which was quite weak in Hungary. This left two public, institutional ways of expressing Jewishness. In Bulgaria and Yugoslavia there were secular communal organizations which organized cultural and social activities. Religious communities hardly existed there. On the other hand, in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the situation was reversed. These communist states, ironically, chose to recognize religious communities and so the only way to express Jewishness publicly was through a religious organization. Curiously, they chose to follow historical traditions in these countries—classifying Jews as a religious group—rather than communist ideology. Needless to say, however, in the communist tradition, each country had a monopolistic religious organization, approved and presumably supervised by the authorities, though in Hungary a small Orthodox community was allowed to exist alongside the larger and more “official” Neolog community, with its chief rabbi and theological seminary. Unlike in the United States or other Western countries, religion did not serve as a surrogate for ethnicity. The vast majority of Czechoslovak and Hungarian Jews did not belong to the religious communities even as a way of expressing their Jewish identification. Religion was in bad odor in communist countries and, secondly, identification as a Jew brought no benefits, to say the least. Moreover, since the religious community was seen as a creature of the state, it was associated with officialdom and political orthodoxy and put off those who were alienated from the regime.

This changed somewhat in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s and 1980s when the religious community in Prague welcomed a few younger people who had been involved in the “Charter 77” protest against the violation of human rights in Czechoslovakia and who had been subsequently hounded by the authorities. Nevertheless, the religious community was carefully monitored and not permitted to become a “counterculture”. Thus, at one point Romanian Chief Rabbi Rosen was denied permission to come to Czechoslovakia to supervise the making of a kosher-for-Passover liqueur because on his previous visit he had preached “Zionist” sermons in Prague’s *Altneushul*, the oldest synagogue in Europe and the center of the religious community. Desider Galsky, a former diplomat and historian who had become the lay head of the community, was removed from office in the 1980s because he had promoted foreign Jewish tourism and visits to the Jewish sites, thereby revealing his nationalistic and “Zionist” inclinations. He was replaced by two men, one of whom had been a chauffeur in the employ of security police and who clearly had no interest in religion.

In Romania, however, there was a strange alliance forged between Chief Rabbi Rosen, who had been made chief rabbi in 1948 and served simultaneously as the religious and lay leader of the Federation of Romanian Jewish Communities, and the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Rosen, who died in May 1994, remains a controversial figure. On the one hand, he managed the emigration of several hundred thousand Jews to Israel at a time when the Soviet Union was fighting such emigration. It turned out that for each Jew who emigrated, the Romanian government received between \$1,000 and \$5,000 from Jewish sources abroad. Jewish emigration was thus an important source of hard currency assistance for the Romanian

regime. Rabbi Rosen also built and ran an impressive network of institutions. According to the Federation of Jewish Communities (FEDROM), in the early 1980s there were 62 Jewish communities, 105 synagogues, over 20 afternoon religious schools, 36 kosher meat distribution centers, 11 kosher restaurants or canteens serving subsidized meals to about 2,500 people daily, 24 medical clinics serving Jews primarily, three old age homes and over 5,000 Jews who were receiving food parcels six times a year.⁶ About 30 per cent of the social assistance budget of FEDROM was provided by the American Joint Distribution Committee which, until the 1990s, was contributing about four million dollars a year to the activities of FEDROM.

Rabbi Rosen was personally involved in these activities to such an extent that he determined who would get a bed in an old age home. He was a deputy in the Romanian parliament and of many international Jewish organizations, traveled frequently abroad and was a well-known public figure at home. The community's newspaper, *Revista Culturii Mozaic*—the name tells the reader that this is an organ of a religious, rather than an ethnocultural, group—was so dominated by the Chief Rabbi, whose picture appeared at least three times in every issue, that it was sardonically referred to as “the Rosenblatt” (*blatt* meaning newspaper in Yiddish). Rosen was criticized for dominating every aspect of Jewish life and for working closely with the increasingly repressive and megalomaniac Ceaușescu. In the late 1980s and early 1990s when these criticisms began to be voiced openly, Rosen defended himself by pointing to the massive Romanian immigration to Israel and the very impressive social and cultural services which had no parallel anywhere in the communist world. He claimed, rightly, that if it were not for his activity and “collaboration”, these would not have been achieved. Whatever the ultimate judgment on Rabbi Rosen's role, he did lead the religious establishment to a position of prominence and to activities unmatched in any communist state.

After the fall of communism

The historic absence of Jewish secular “thick culture” in Hungary and the Czech lands, and its rapid decline in Romania and Poland, and the politically determined unavailability of Zionist or even Israel-oriented cultural activity meant that when communist systems were replaced in the fall of 1989, there was little aside from religion through which Jews could conduct Jewish cultural lives or even express their Jewish identities. Without independent resources of their own, in states that were strapped and retreating from social services and the support of cultural activities, Jews in East Central Europe had to rely on external assistance if they were to recreate cultural institutions. Israel's agenda in the region was to promote *aliyah*. The Jewish Agency and the Israeli government are not interested in the revival of Jewish culture and religion unless they lead to immigration to Israel. Thus, schools and summer camps with a Zionist orientation, cultural activities centered on Israel, and visits by Israeli scholars and educators are encouraged. On the other hand, the Joint and the British World Jewish Relief as well as similar organizations in other Western countries, made a basic decision to support both the welfare and cultural needs of the local populations, at least until such time as the latter could generate their own sources of support. Thus, it became possible in principle to attempt a Jewish revival or at least maintenance of what existed in the countries of the area.

The agenda of needs and goals for the Jews of the area seem to me to be strikingly parallel to those on the agendas of the post-communist states generally, perhaps because *vi es kristelt zich, azay idelt zich*. The first agenda item is national identity. Many peoples in the

⁶ Federation of Jewish Communities of the Socialist Republic of Romania, ‘Facts and Figures on the Jewish Communities in Romania’, 1983.

former Soviet Union have had to define the boundaries of their national identities and decide to which state they should belong and how to constitute their own nations: Czechs and Slovaks; Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Macedonians; Magyars in Romania and Slovakia; Turks in Bulgaria and others have been making these choices. Similarly, Jews in the region, like those elsewhere, have been wrestling since 1989 with some vexed questions.

Jewish identities in post-communist East Central Europe

Jewishness is no longer a consensual, fixed identity, if it ever was. For half a century until 1990 Jews were defined in East Central Europe more by boundaries than by content, and more by the perceptions of others rather than by their own sense of who they are. As Mikhail Chlenov observes about Soviet Jewry, “The average Soviet non-Jew considers as Jewish anybody who has some kind of link to Jews of Judaism. The offspring of mixed marriages would thus normally be considered Jewish in the wider society, regardless of what their passport says.”⁷ This was probably less true in the Czech lands than in the USSR, but equally true in Poland, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.

The importance of others’ perceptions in identifying Jews was magnified by the absence of formal institutions and individual affiliations which would supply visible markers of Jewishness. What Jonathan Webber remarks about much of world Jewry applies especially to the region: “the characteristic units of today’s Jewish world may not always be tightly knit ‘communities’ but aggregates of people whose links with each other are not necessarily self-evident, let alone predictably harmonious”.⁸ As a study of 150 Hungarian Jews in the 1980s observes, “. . . For most of our respondents, being Jewish meant belonging to some kind of secondary or virtual community, based not so much on common interactions as on allusory identification”, and certainly not based on religion or culture.⁹ A similar study in Poland found that for all 25 people interviewed “their Jewish identity, unlike the Polish one, is a secondary, subsequent, or additional factor—in some cases it was consciously chosen in adult life”. Moreover, those interviewed meant different things when they identified themselves as Jews and they dealt with their Jewishness in many different ways. The “Jewish self-identification of the people I interviewed was always a process rather than a static fact.”¹⁰

This observation can be extrapolated to the area and perhaps to the rest of Diaspora Jewry. Jews are able to choose both their own conceptions of who they are and the more public and explicit ways in which they want to express them. “The dynamics of ethnic identity perpetually rest on the constant reformulation of the ethnic self . . .” and so “Jewish identities are to be understood as constructs in response to the circumstances.”¹¹ Having had no choice in the matter during the communist period, those Jews who choose to examine their identities now have important choices to make. Interestingly, in Poland Jews play a large role in the Polish search for self-definition and identity. The much noted infatuation with things Jewish, which has lasted about a decade in Poland, may stem from curiosity, guilt, commercialism, or a realization of the historic role that Jews played in that country and which was unmentioned for half a century, but the fact remains that “Jews represent the outside

⁷ M. Chlenov, ‘Jewish Communities and Jewish Identities in the Former Soviet Union’, in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. J. Webber, p. 132.

⁸ Introduction in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. J. Webber, p. 23.

⁹ F. Erős, ‘The Construction of Jewish Identity in Hungary in the 1980s’, in *A Quest for Identity: Post War Jewish Biographies*, ed. Y. Kashti, et al. (Tel Aviv: School of Education, Tel Aviv University, 1996), p. 62. See also A. Kovács, ‘Anti-Semitism and Jewish Identity in Post-Communist Hungary’, in *Anti-Semitism and the Treatment of the Holocaust in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, ed. R. L. Braham (New York: Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, CUNY and Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 138.

¹⁰ M. Melchior, ‘Jewish Identity in Poland: Between Ascription and Choice’, *Kashti*, 98, 99.

¹¹ *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. J. Webber, p. 82.

group against which Poles define their ethnic boundaries In talking about their relationship to Jews, Poles are really focusing on themselves.”¹² When confronting the place of Jews in Polish history, Poles invariably must deal with issues such as the relationship between Catholic religion and Polish ethnicity, whether Poland was and is a multinational state or not, the place of tolerance and prejudice in Polish culture, how Poles relate today to their Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belorussian neighbors.

Generalizing broadly across the region, I suggest that there are five dominant forms of Jewish identification today. First, there are the traditional forms, meaning both the old religious forms as well as the secular forms adopted from the communist period. For example, the TSKZ (Social and Cultural Society of Jews) in Poland, long an instrument of communist Yiddishist secularism, continues to exist, but has made enough modifications to attract some younger people who do not know Yiddish. In Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, the religious organizations of the communist period remain, albeit with somewhat new leadership and, in some cases, without the monopoly they once enjoyed.

Strikingly, though some Hungarian Jews had in 1988 founded a Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association to provide a secular, ethnic alternative to the religious framework and conception of Hungarian Jewry, when in 1990 the government offered the Jews the chance to be classified officially as an ethnic minority like Serbs and Germans, most people opposed this and the representatives of Hungarian Jewry declined the offer. They preferred to remain Magyars of the Israelite faith—the name of the official Jewish organization was National Representation of Magyar Israelites [*Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete, MIOK*].¹³ After much discussion, in 1991 MIOK changed its name to the Alliance of Hungarian Jewish Religious Communities [*Magyarországi Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége*]. The shift from “Israelite” to “Jewish” is significant—it is a shift from a religious to an ethnic category—but the group is still defined in religious terms.

A second form of Jewish identification is activist and creative, seeking new content and forms of expression. People who are interested in actively expressing their Jewishness are searching for ways to do so. This is most visible in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. One sees people searching for a viable alternative to established religious forms and, in the case of Poland, to the Yiddish-based secular culture which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was adapted by the communists to their needs. In countries with no strong secular tradition this means the creation of an ethnic, rather than religious, Jewish identity. What makes this especially difficult is the absence of a “thick culture” on which to base this identity, and the reluctance to leave it as a matter simply of boundaries.

This leaves a second, “thinner” form of culture, which is composed of the values, understandings and interpretations shared by the group. For example, many Jews in and from the former USSR believe that Jews are linked by a high esteem for education and the professions, that they have higher moral standards than others, and that they make disproportionate contributions to culture. In Hungary,

To be Jewish means a value feeling of being different, but the terms by which these differences are measured are not always clear. The majority of our respondents stated that most of their friends as well as their partners were Jewish, without their having consciously sought out Jewish contacts The discovery of whether another person is Jewish or not is basically a meta-communicative experience, as it is very difficult to formulate the criteria verbally by which a person’s affiliation can be ascertained.¹⁴

¹² C. Rosenson, ‘Polish Identity Construction: Historical Myths Reconsidered’, Ch. 6 of dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Michigan, pp. 3, 6.

¹³ A. Kovács, ‘Are Hungarian Jews a National Minority? Remarks on a Public Debate’, *East European Jewish Affairs* 24/2 (winter 1994) pp. 63–71.

¹⁴ F. Erős, ‘The Construction of Jewish Identity’, p. 66.

No doubt, similar experiences are shared by Jews in other parts of the world. However, these values and shared understandings of “thin culture” derive from two sources, common experiences and shared substantive or “thick” culture. This second, “thinner” form of culture depends on the existence of the first, “thicker” type. If Jews now and in the future have fewer common experiences and shared interests, no common Jewish language, and will interact less with each other, their values, understandings and interpretations will no longer be shared to the same extent. “. . . As they interact with each other and with the world around them, group members . . . develop more substantial and distinctive common views of themselves, their relations with the rest of the world, and their emergent, collective past.”¹⁵ The converse is true and may well characterize East European Jewry. For many Jews at present and perhaps more in the future, their ethnicity has become largely symbolic.

Herbert Gans suggested that in the third generation, most immigrant groups in America—certainly the Jews—retained only a symbolic ethnicity.

As the functions of ethnic cultures and groups diminish and identity becomes the primary way of being ethnic, ethnicity takes on an expressive rather than an instrumental function in people’s lives, becoming more of a leisure-time activity and losing its relevance, say, to earning a living or regulating family life . . . Symbolic ethnicity . . . does not require functioning groups or networks; feelings of identity can be developed by allegiances to symbolic groups that never meet. . . . symbolic ethnicity does not need a practiced culture, even if the symbols are borrowed from it.¹⁶

Gans suggests that symbolic ethnicity can persist into the fifth and sixth generations after immigration. Perhaps that is true also of people that many generations removed from substantive culture even if they never migrated.

However, Gans and others believe that symbolic ethnicity supports “straight line theory”, the idea that acculturation precedes assimilation and that these are secular “trends that culminate in the eventual absorption of the ethnic group into the larger culture and general population.”¹⁷ The research of Mary Waters and Richard Alba on American ethnic groups supports the “straight line theory”. While conceding that the intensity of ethnic identity in America varies from one group to another, Richard Alba notes that “it is hard to avoid the conclusion that ethnic experience is shallow for the great majority of whites and, in the critical domain of culture, being eroded by the churning of large-scale demographic forces.”¹⁸ This, then, is a third type of Diaspora Jewish identification which is symbolic and only occasionally expressed. That is, Jewishness is treated as peripheral factor to one’s daily existence, not denied but making no serious claims on one’s time, energy or resources. Jews participate in occasional cultural or even religious activities, memorial meetings connected to the Holocaust, and may tend to have a disproportionate number of Jewish friends. But as regards “straight line theory”, East Central European Jews may follow a different pattern, at least in the short run, because ethnic identity is such a burning issue today for all peoples in the region, and because re-identification rather than assimilation is the dominant mode. Ethnic boundaries are more sharply drawn than in the United States and as long as ethnic, rather than civic, identities are what engage many people’s attention, the thrust to assimilation may be blunted.

A fourth type of identification is when one considers oneself a “Pole/Czech/Hungarian of

¹⁵ S. Cornell, ‘The Various Ties that Bind: Content and Circumstance in Ethnic Processes’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 19/2 (April 1996), p. 276.

¹⁶ H. Gans, ‘Symbolic Ethnicity’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2 (1979) pp. 9, 10.

¹⁷ H. Gans, ‘Symbolic Ethnicity’, p. 2.

¹⁸ R. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 297. See also M. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Jewish origin". Here Jewish ethnic identity is rejected, and while religious identification is logically possible, it is rare for this type. Jewishness is seen as a genetic accident with no bearing on one's own life. However, such a person tends to manifest more interest in Jewish matters than the Poles, Czechs, etc. who are not "of Jewish origin".

Another type of Jewish identification is the "defensive". It is produced by boundaries alone, more specifically by expressions of anti-Semitism which arouse a defensive identification, as opposed to hiding one's Jewishness. As a Hungarian Jew put it, "Basically, I am not Jewish, but if I meet an anti-Semite, I become Jewish." This is "reactive, marginal, 'borderline' Jewish identity manifested in concrete interactions".¹⁹

To this typology one might add the Talmudic "*tinok she-nishba levayn ha-goyim*", the innocent babe who has been captured by heathens and is totally unaware of his or her Jewishness. This is an important category in East Central Europe because of the Holocaust. An unknown number of Jewish children were given to non-Jews for safekeeping. Many were taken to Israel and Jewish communities shortly after the war, but they keep reappearing. In Warsaw, a club of "hidden children" was formed by a retired mathematics professor. By the third meeting there were about 100 people attending, including a Catholic priest who only when his adoptive Polish mother was dying, and he was already in his fifties, learned from her that he was the child of their Jewish neighbors who had been deported. In Hungary, according to András Kovács, one third of surviving Jews in 1945 had been baptized. Others became communists because it promised a world without nations, where class, not ethnicity, determined one's status and where there would be no ethnic or racial discrimination, or because "communism is a revenge against the God who allowed all this [the Holocaust] to happen". A third type of Jew, believing that only anti-Semitism made them Jewish, engaged in "stigma management", or, in American terms, "passing". (Erős calls this a "strategy of silence") Of 117 Jews interviewed in Hungary, all but 36 were in families that had changed their names to conceal their Jewish origins. Parents did not tell children that they were Jews, and the latter found out usually by accident, from neighbors, classmates, friends. This negative identity became a norm transmitted across generations, so that for some, Jewish identity survived from one generation to the next, but only as a stigma to be covered up as much as possible.²⁰ A founder of the ethnically oriented Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association recalls:

I grew up in a completely assimilated family . . . My father converted to Christianity after serving in a forced labor brigade during the war, and never told me he was born a Jew. I didn't find out until after he died. Once I came home from school and told my mother how we had teased a Jewish boy, and then she told me the truth. It took me about another fifteen years of soul-searching to tell myself that I was a Jew.²¹

The existence of different types of identities creates tensions among Jews, as witness the sectarian struggles among Israeli and Diaspora Jewry. Particularly now, when the process of shaping not only individual but collective identities is intense, and where, as we shall see, material interests as well as ideologies are involved, there is a conflict and competition among the advocates of the various identities. This is compounded by the absence of a tradition of pluralism and toleration of difference. A Polish Jewish activist of the "middle generation",

¹⁹ A. Kovács, 'Change in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary', in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. J. Webber, pp. 154–58.

²⁰ A. Kovács, 'Anti-Semitism and Jewish Identity in Post-Communist Hungary', in *Anti-Semitism and the Treatment of the Holocaust in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, ed. R. L. Braham.

²¹ Gábor Deák in an interview with Calev Ben-David, 'Hungarian Jewry Searches for its Soul', *Jerusalem Post*, August 25, 1990.

who began to rediscover his Jewish roots in the 1970s, comments on generational tensions which are congruent with conceptual differences.

For many of the “old” [born before the war] Jews, we were at first a nuisance, then a fraud, and finally a mystery . . . Our Jewishness, self-made and often contradictory, did not strike them as authentic . . . But what puzzled the “old” Jews most was “Why?” For what conceivable reason would young people who could well pass as Poles . . . adopt of their own volition and actively pursue a fate they had themselves spent their lives avoiding?²²

Ironically, a third generation, many of them the children of those who rediscovered and to some extent, reinvented their Jewishness in the 1970s and 1980s, now regard the “new” Jews of those years with some bewilderment and even amusement, as they engage less self-consciously in Jewish social and cultural activities and take advantage of opportunities not available to their predecessors.

Homelands

Even during the communist period there had been several opportunities for Jews in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and, of course, Romania, to emigrate to Israel. From 1990 on there were no barriers to doing so. Yet, immigration to Israel has been very modest, amounting to a few thousand at most from the entire region. Clearly, the vast majority of Jews who remain in the region choose to do so and are likely to live out their lives in their native countries. Most, especially in the postwar generations, have sincere and even passionate attachments to their state, to the majority culture and even to the majority peoples, though in Romania the last attachment may be somewhat weaker than elsewhere. Nevertheless, Israel is not prepared to write these people off as potential *olim*. While most people in the region welcome Israeli cultural programs and take advantage of opportunities to visit and even study in Israel, one hears expressions of resentment at what they perceive as the Israeli official and unofficial attitude that Jews have no business living in Eastern Europe and must emigrate to the Jewish state. They see this as demeaning their own intelligence and ability to make informed judgments, as an expression of Israeli paranoia about the *galut*, and a crude attempt to serve Israel’s presumed needs rather than their own. Nevertheless, almost all acknowledge the central role that Israel plays in the life of Jews everywhere.

A similar ambivalence may be observed in the attitudes of many toward the Jewish Diaspora. Like post-Soviet Jews, they were initially dependent on world Jewry for financial assistance, cultural materials, educators and other professional personnel, and models of organization and activity. In the view of some, this bred a paternalistic relationship between the foreign donors who had all the assets, and the local recipients who, they were afraid, would be seen not only as mendicants but as ignoramuses and dependent children. In fact, as some of the communities have begun to acquire wealth of their own, the relationship is changing. Since 1991, the Czech Jewish community has not received funds from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture or the Joint Distribution Committee because it is able to sustain itself. No doubt, this will make for a healthier and more comfortable relationship in the long run, but until such time as the local populations can supply their own funds, rabbis, teachers, and others there will be somewhat of an asymmetrical relationship between world Jewry and Israel, on one hand, and East Central European Jews, on the other.

The ghosts of the past

²² K. Gebert, ‘Jewish Identities in Poland: New, Old and Imaginary’ in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. J. Webber, p. 165.

“Lustration” is the term used in the Czech Republic and elsewhere for the complicated and often emotional issue of whether and how to punish officials of the communist regimes for violations of human rights and other misdeeds while in office. Among Jews, this seems to be a non-issue in Poland. In Romania, Rabbi Rosen was criticized for his close relationship with Ceaușescu’s regime, but there were not many public calls for removing him from office. In 1992, at FEDROM’s request, the Joint Distribution Committee sent a rabbi, an educator and a manager to Bucharest to take up senior positions. They resigned within a year. Some local communities tried to loosen ties with FEDROM and elect new leaders. Rabbi Rosen’s death in 1994 allowed for modest changes in the lay leadership, though the new community head, Nicolae Cajal, had occupied a prominent position in FEDROM. Following a pattern established after Stalin’s death in the Soviet and East European states, the leadership was split so as not to concentrate too much power in a single person, and a new chief rabbi, Yekheskel Mark, was imported from Israel.

In Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Hungary “lustration” was more contentious. In March 1990 a new, independent organization, “Zion”, was formed in Bulgaria as a counter to the communist dominated “Shalom” society and it pledged to revive Jewish culture, re-establish links with world Jewry, assist Jews in need, and forge business ties with foreign Jews. The Jewish newspaper got a new editor, Eliezer Alfandary, who had never been a party member, and Yosef Astrukov, the communist head of “Shalom” was replaced amidst some acrimony. In June 1990, Rabbi Daniel Mayer of Prague resigned when he admitted that he had reported to the secret police during his tenure in office, though he had done nothing egregious or, indeed, unusual. At about the same time, Desider Galsky made a triumphant comeback as lay head of the Czech community, which he had been from 1980–85 before his ouster. His successors were now unceremoniously dismissed. Tragically, Galsky died in an automobile accident shortly thereafter. By September 1992, Karol Sidon, a former dissident and friend of President Vaclav Havel, was installed as rabbi in Prague, after several years of study in Germany and Israel. In Hungary, Mrs. Ilona Seifert, who had succeeded her late husband as head of MIOK, was voted out of office on the grounds that she had been too close to the communist government. Her successor, Gustáv Zoltai, pledged that there would be no “witch hunt for collaborators . . . We have closed the door on the past. If something should, nevertheless, emerge, we will handle it quietly within the community.”²³ In sum, there has been relatively little recrimination and political bloodletting within the post-communist communities, though a few individuals have been shunned.

Restitution

Jewish communities and individuals were deprived of their properties, including their homes, and their wealth, first by the Nazis and their local collaborators, and then by communist nationalizations. Although the great majority of the owners are no longer alive, survivors, heirs and communities have claims. Restitution has been a tortuous process, and, in most instances, the issue is not resolved. It is complicated by claims made by churches, German expellees and others and the awkwardness of discriminating among groups of claimants.

In Hungary after 1945, Jewish property confiscated by the fascists was to have been placed in a trust to help survivors and to restore communities. The Jewish Recovery Trust established in 1947 accomplished little since the Hungarian state nationalized everything. In 1990 the government conceded it had illegally appropriated funds and returned a grand total

²³ Quoted in A. Rabinovich, ‘Prague “Informer” Rabbi May Get Budapest Post’, *Jerusalem Post*, June 22, 1990.

of \$5,000.²⁴ In 1991 the government compensated political prisoners but postponed consideration of the claims of Nazi victims. A year later a third compensation law covered those deported from Hungary but not those killed in the country or incarcerated in ghettos and camps within it. It ignored the May 1938 Hungarian law which had placed restrictions on Jewish property. But the government did agree to pay reparations (in forint) to citizens of Hungary (not Transylvania) who were incarcerated or who had lost property, though the sum was symbolic. Finally, only in 1996 was the Hungarian Jewish Heritage Foundation established by agreement of the government and local and world Jewish organizations in order to manage the assets and \$26 million in compensation coupons contributed by the government, with life annuities to be paid to survivors. This was approved by parliament in October.²⁵ In 1998, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities agreed that the Jewish community would receive a \$63 million annuity representing the value of its 152 confiscated schools and other buildings. The first installment of \$2.9 million would be paid in 1998.²⁶

Restitution in the Czech Republic is more complicated. The government wants to avoid linking Jewish claims with those of German expellees, lest the latter recover huge properties in the western part of the country, as well as with the Catholic Church. Moreover, there is a complicating factor within the Jewish population. As a result of the high rate of intermarriage before the war and the consequences of the German occupation, there are many children of mixed marriages in the country. Some of them wished to be recognized as members of the community. Suspecting that they were motivated by a desire to gain access to restituted properties, and knowing that many of the applicants are not Jewish according to *Halakha*, the established and recognized community rejected them. Some formed an alternative community, *Beit Simkha*, but what their standing is vis-à-vis returned property is not altogether clear. Here the issue of identity took on a new dimension. In any case, the Federation of Jewish Communities in 1990 requested the return of 106 or 120 properties. Nothing was done for several years. In February 1994 a restitution bill was voted down by parliament, and President Havel criticized the foot dragging. On April 29, 1994 a bill was passed that allows Czech citizens permanently residing in the republic to claim property held by the state or municipalities, but not by private owners. Much depends on the good will of local authorities. While 202 properties are covered by this bill, only about 30 have been returned and many properties in prime locations had been sold by local councils to third, private parties, even after the passage of the bill. In Prague, only one of 18 listed properties, the invaluable Jewish Museum, was returned, though the *Altneushul* had been returned earlier. At least seventy current owners had refused to hand properties over to Jewish communities.²⁷

It was only in 1995 that the Romanian parliament began discussing restoration and compensation for seized properties. Prime Minister Nicolae Vacaroiu opposed the discussion on the grounds that the issue had been covered in legislation of the late 1940s and that, in any case, the budget could not bear the burden of restitution.²⁸ In Bulgaria too the issue began to be discussed only in 1995. In Croatia, a 1996 bill stipulates that only property taken after 1945 would be considered; only Croatian citizens were eligible for compensation; and only property not already privatized could be returned.²⁹ Finally, in Poland a draft law on restitution of Jewish property was introduced in April 1996, long after the Catholic and Orthodox churches had been dealt with. The law covers only communal, not individual,

²⁴ D. Doder, 'Jews Fight for Their Lost Wealth', *The European*, October 12–14, 1990.

²⁵ *OMRI Report*, July 9 and October 9, 1996.

²⁶ *RFE/RL Report*, October 2, 1998.

²⁷ *OMRI Report*, October 2, 1996.

²⁸ *OMRI Report*, September 6, 1995.

²⁹ S. de Prato, 'Row Brewing Over Croatian Restitution Proposal', *Jewish Chronicle*, (London), April 26, 1996.

property. Each case is to be discussed by a special committee of government and Jewish community representatives. Formerly Polish Jews living abroad will have no say in these matters.³⁰

This issue is technically, politically and emotionally very difficult.³¹ Jews feel entitled to compensation, but some worry that this will call forth anti-Semitic images of rapacious Jews. Others believe that governments and individuals are trying to do all they can to keep their ill gotten gains from Jews. External actors also are involved. When the Prague Jewish Museum was being discussed, Israeli officials put in a claim as the “heirs of the murdered Jewish people”; the Czech government argued that the materials were part of Czech culture; the local Jewish community argued that the museum belonged to it; and foreign dealers saw this as an opportunity to purchase very valuable artifacts. In the end, a distinguished Jewish cultural figure, Leo Pavlat, was made head of the museum and the museum itself is under the jurisdiction of the Czech Jewish community.

Clearly, this is an issue that will take years to resolve. It raises all kinds of sensitive issues in the relations among Jews and their neighbors; among local Jews themselves; and between local Jews and governments, on one hand, and foreign Jews, on the other. But restitution is potentially the largest source of financial means for reconstruction and preservation in the region. Already in 1991, the Czech Jewish community became financially independent and others could follow suit. This would aid them not only materially but psychologically, as they would then cease to be dependent on foreign patronage and take their places as equals in world Jewry. Whereas in the West restitution involves individual compensation by private institutions such as banks and insurance companies, in the East it involves mostly communal compensation by governments.

Anti-Semitism

Among its other failures, communism did not bring about “mutual understandings among peoples” and eliminate ethnic hatreds, as is obvious from events in the former Yugoslavia, Romania, Slovakia and elsewhere. An exploration of anti-Semitism in East Central Europe today deserves a separate treatment and is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, it should be noted that, unlike in the interwar period, the Western world—and not only world Jewry—is sensitive to this issue and has on several occasions made it clear that one of the conditions for “joining Europe” is governmental commitments to combat ethnic discrimination, including anti-Semitism. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, world Jewry is particularly sensitive to the revival or re-emergence of anti-Semitism in the region. This should serve as a brake on tendencies in that direction. Secondly, the problem of anti-Semitism should be seen as part of the larger struggle between two *Weltanschauungen* which are competing for the allegiance of East Central Europeans. One is oriented toward Europe, democracy, Western culture, a modified market economy, urbanity and pluralism. The other is inward looking, rejects the West as a source of decadence and immorality, glorifies peasant virtues and is suspicious of the city, favors a paternalistic welfare state, and regards Jews as aliens who have imported, first the evils of capitalism, then communism (the myth of the *żydokomuna* is still very powerful) and now, again, are “exploiting” the “authentic” population by taking advantage of capitalist opportunities. Which of these two views wins out will determine not only the position of the Jews but the place of the region as a whole in the political and cultural map of Europe. A recent example is the struggle one decade ago over the more than 300 crosses erected near Auschwitz in order to protest plans to remove a papal

³⁰ M. Halaba, ‘Sacred Ground’, *Warsaw Business Journal*, July 8–14, 1996.

³¹ For some issues involving national Jewish communities and the World Jewish Restitution Organization, see ‘The Accounting’, *Jerusalem Report*, March 6, 1997.

cross outside the camp used by Pope John Paul II during a 1979 mass at Birkenau . More generally, the crosses are intended to commemorate Polish Catholics killed in Auschwitz and raise the visibility of the Polish connection to it as a place of Christian martyrdom. An October 1988 poll showed that only 15 per cent of Poles backed the placing of the crosses near Auschwitz.³² However, a militant Catholic group, backed by several priests and the Radio Maria station, persisted. Six Polish intellectuals, including Nobel Prize winners Czesław Miłosz and Wiesława Szymborska, sent an open letter to Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek demanding that the government “put an end to provocations and adventures” at the Auschwitz site. Several veterans organizations also protested government passivity. Significantly, just before a meeting in Washington in early December 1998 on the restitution of art, bank holdings and insurance policies to the heirs of Holocaust victims, Buzek pledged to remove all the crosses. Here we see the interplay of inward-looking Poles who wish to rid Poland of the Jewish presence even if it almost entirely belongs to the past, intellectuals who are sensitive to Jewish concerns because of their Western orientation and their own liberal values, and political calculations of the impact the affair can have on Western opinion and policy, and hence on Poland’s admission to NATO and the European Union.

Conclusion

Though great new opportunities are available to the Jews of East Central Europe, they cannot re-create Jewish life as it was before 1939. Moreover, as in that earlier period, each country will go its own way, and each Jewish community will develop a distinctive character, drawing on prewar traditions, but not replicating them. Before the fall of communism, some of the countries appeared to be neglected cemeteries of Jewishness, with no Jewish activity in the present and hardly anyone who cared about the past. Today it is likely that the Jewish populations of the region will evolve into two types: 1) museums, preserving the past with a few knowledgeable curators available to show local and foreign populations what had existed there. Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, and perhaps Bulgaria as well, will fit more or less into this category. 2) viable, though small, communities, demographically skewed heavily toward the older generations and hence requiring many social services, but with a range of Jewish institutions and with committed members who insure a functioning present and most likely a modest future. Hungary, of course, with its 80–100,000 Jews, three day schools in Budapest, and wide range of social services and communal institutions, is the largest community with the best future prospects, but the 5,000 or so Jews in the Czech Republic and in Poland, and the 8,000 in Romania, should be able to maintain themselves as members of the world Jewish family. One should remember that their Jewish populations will be no smaller than those of some West European states and should be able to carry on some level of meaningful Jewish activity. Many Jews in Israel, Western Europe and the Americas have their roots in the region, and there is a reasonable prospect that some of the trees that were cut down can, with proper nurturing, grow again, though never to their previous heights and never bearing the kind of fruit which they once did.

³² Quoted in R. E. Gruber, ‘Only 15 per cent of Poles back crosses at Auschwitz’, *Jewish Chronicle*, October 2, 1998.