

In the
Shadows of the
**Holocaust &
Communism**

Czech and Slovak Jews
Since 1945



Alena Heitlinger

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In memory of

my parents,

Hana and Ota Heitlinger

and

my grandparents,

Luisa and Adolf Heitlinger
(murdered in the Shoah)

and

Anna and Fritz Knöpfelmacher
(who survived by emigrating in 1939 to Palestine)



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Contents

List of Tables	ix
List of Boxes	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
1 Czech and Slovak Jews of the Postwar Generation: An Overview	1
2 The Socio-Political Context	19
3 (Non)Remembering Jews and the Holocaust	47
4 The Parental Generation of Holocaust Survivors	67
5 The Postwar Generation: Coming to Terms with Jewishness	89
6 Jewish Youth Groups of the 1960s	105
7 Emigration and a Sense of Home	125
8 The End of Czechoslovakia and the Reconstruction of Jewish Memory	143
9 Institutional Renewal and Conflict After 1989	161
10 Rethinking Jewishness and Jewish Identities	189
11 Conclusion	205
Select Bibliography	217
Index	229



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List of Tables

1.1	Survey Respondents' Years of Birth	8
1.2	Nationality/Ethnicity of Spouses/Partners of Survey Respondents	10
4.1.	Wartime Experiences of Parents	71
5.1.	Responses to the Question "When did you become aware that you are Jewish?"	90
7.1.	Survey Respondents' Attitudes towards Israel as a Jewish State	132
7.2	Survey Responses to the Question "I would not feel at home in Israel because"	135
8.1	Survey Responses to the Question "How did you experience the partition of Czechoslovakia?"	145
8.2.	Survey Responses to the Question "What is your current opinion on the partition of Czechoslovakia?"	145
10.1	Survey Respondents' Attitudes to the Question of "Who is a Jew?"	189
10.2	Survey Responses to the Question "I am attracted to Jewishness by:"	193
10.3	Survey Respondents' Attitudes towards Concealment of Their Jewish Descent	198
10.4	Positive Attitudes to Jewishness by Survey Respondents	201



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List of Boxes

5.1 Responses to the Question “When did you become aware that you are Jewish?” Supplement with a description of the circumstances under which you learned about it	91
6.1. Titles of Lectures for Jewish Youth at the Prague Jewish Town Hall, 1966-1974	116
7.1 Perspectives on “Where is My Home?”	136
9.1 Chronology of Significant Events at the Prague <i>Kehillah</i> , April 2004 – December 2005	169



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1

Czech and Slovak Jews of the Postwar Generation: An Overview

This book is about identity and community formation among a post-war generation of Czech and Slovak Jews who grew up under Czechoslovak communism and who came of age during the de-Stalinization period of 1962–68. The main focus is on inter- and intra- generational differences and similarities, and on the changing historical and political circumstances of Czechoslovak state socialism/communism that have shaped an individual's consciousness and identity as a Jew, an assimilated Czech, Slovak, or Czechoslovak and, where relevant, as an émigré or an immigrant.

The study also addresses a larger set of research questions about the formation of Jewish identity in the midst of political upheavals, secularization, assimilation, and modernity: Who is a Jew? How is Jewish identity defined? How does Jewish identity change based on different historical and social contexts? How is Jewish identity transmitted from one generation to the next? How have the Holocaust,¹ communism, and postcommunism impacted on what being Jewish means to Czech and Slovak Jews, and what do these two cases tell us, in comparative terms, about similar experiences in other former communist countries, or in established liberal democracies such as neighbouring Austria?

Design of the Study

Conceptual Framework

When traumatic historical events and transformations coincide with one's entry into young adulthood, the personal and historical significance of life course transitions interact and intensify. The basis is then laid for a cohort generation, characterized by a common

2 In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism

habitus (orientation to life),² identity, and a unique set of life choices, opportunities, and availability of resources.³ Cohort generations and their aging offer an important framework in which to study change and continuity in life-course patterns, social norms and, above all, the interaction between personally driven life choices (such as adoption of a specific ethnic identity) and historically imposed processes. Since there are structured variations in exposure to (and interpretation of) specific historical conditions and events—by social class, gender, geography, ethnicity, and kinship relations—it is essential that an examination of whole cohorts and generations be complemented by an analysis of life course variation *within* cohorts and generations.⁴ Thus the broad notion of a generation has to be complemented by notions such as “generational unit,”⁵ and by the recognition that generations and internal generational cohorts and units are also constructed through the institutionalization of collective memory.⁶

The present analysis of the role of history and of generation in shaping contemporary national, ethnic, religious and/or secular Czech/Slovak Jewish identities relates both to those who remained in Czechoslovakia and those who emigrated, either to Israel in the mid-1960s, or across the globe after the Soviet invasion of August 1968. The two main categories employed for the analysis of generational similarities and differences among postwar Czech and Slovak Jewry are concepts of “symbolic ethnicity” and “collective memory.” My examination of the pluralism of Czech and Slovak Jewish identities of the various birth cohorts, and of the potential in-built conflicts among ethnic, national, and religious loyalties, will also rely on the postmodern notion of “coming out Jewish,”⁷ and on concepts of “multiple identities that are grounded in multiple societies,” be it a “singular hybridized transnational identity” or “separate multiple identities that link them simultaneously to several nations.”⁸ Last but not least, I will also apply ideal typical terms of “thick” and “thin” culture and related notions of “thick” and “thin” identities.⁹

Liebman defines thick Jewish culture as one that “consumes the life of the individual”¹⁰ and “renders Judaism or Jewishness the major part of one’s life space.”¹¹ As an example of someone whose Jewish culture or identity is thick, Liebman mentions a Jew with a multi-dimensional identity, for whom sitting down to the Passover Seder evokes a plethora of associations, such as activities connected with the celebration of the holiday, memories of childhood and, “when

coupled with other holiday celebrations, other rituals, other public and private events, each of which evoke their own layers of meaning and associated memories.”¹² In contrast, “for the Jew whose culture is thin, these memories are absent. The Seder becomes a meal, a family gathering, and little more.”¹³ Liebman further argues that “those whose Jewish culture or identity is thin are reluctant to accept any binding definition of Jewishness. Jewishness is a matter of choice or cultivation rather than birth or fate.”¹⁴ Few of the subjects in this study meet the religious definition of a thick culture but, as we shall see, they do not fit the defining criteria of a thin Jewish identity and culture either. For example, the salience of being Jewish and the participation in Jewish social networks are important to Czech and Slovak Jews, and both are considered by Liebman as “the building blocks upon which a thick culture is built.”¹⁵ Thus it is more useful to consider Czech/Slovak Jewish identities on a continuum from a thick to a thin Jewish culture rather than trying to fit them into two rigidly defined polar opposite ideal types.

The notions of thin and thick culture overlap with the concept of symbolic ethnicity. Herbert Gans, who introduced this concept to sociological terminology, used it to explore ethnic identities of assimilated and acculturated third-generation immigrants to the U.S. In his view, assimilated or acculturated members belonging to the third immigrant generation in the U.S. “refrain from ethnic behavior that requires an arduous or time-consuming commitment either to a culture that must be practiced constantly, or to organizations that demand active membership...Because people’s concern is with identity rather than with cultural practices or group relationships, they are free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suits them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse, or individualistic identity.”¹⁶

The concept of ethnicity as a symbolic community has been used successfully by Rappaport¹⁷ in her study of Jewish-German relations after the Holocaust, and by Gudonis¹⁸ in his study of Jewish identity constructions in postcommunist Poland. However, as Rappaport has argued, to be of analytical use, notions of symbolic ethnicity have to be combined with the concept of collective memory. In her view, “ethnic behavior, like all behavior, is shaped by memory,” yet “the large majority of sociological studies of race and ethnicity have ignored collective memory as a significant factor in defining ethnic identity.”¹⁹ As the French sociologist Maurice

4 In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism

Halbwachs²⁰ has argued, memory is not just individual, but also social or collective. Thus, we remember (and forget) specific events both as individuals and as members of social groups. Our remembering (or lack thereof) is also influenced by the differing socio-political contexts in which we happen to live. For example, during both the state socialist and the early postcommunist periods, the past was typically read from the highly politicized present, which endowed the writing (and rewriting) of official histories and memories with a symbolic political, ideological and moral significance and potency that is lacking in established liberal democracies.²¹ Moreover, since women and men may experience significant historical events and their memorialization differently, the generational approach has to be integrated with a gender analysis.²²

In contrast with other communist countries, the postwar Czech/Slovak Jewish community has been shaped not just by the Holocaust and by Stalinism at large, but also by the very specific experiences of de-Stalinization that eventually led to the Prague Spring of 1968. There is no direct counterpart to this experience in other parts of East-Central Europe. Kovács has argued that in communist Hungary “official Jewish representative organisations functioned strictly as religious associations within the limits set by the state for churches in general; these organizations were eager to carry out government instructions.”²³ Czech and Slovak archival evidence suggests that with the exception of the 1980s, this did not apply to Czech and Slovak Jewish representatives. They tried their best to act as advocates for the Jewish community, consistently challenging the official definition of the Jewish community as a purely local religious association. Although negotiations and lobbying on behalf of the Jewish community were carried out from a position of institutional powerlessness, leaders of the Czech and Slovak Jewish communities tried to exploit available political opportunities. Many of the lobbying and legitimacy seeking efforts ended in failure but, as we shall see in chapters 2, 3, and 6, some eventually paid off.

Methods, Data, Sources

There is hardly any indigenous or foreign scholarly literature on the postwar history of Czech and Slovak Jewry, which makes this study a particularly exciting one. For example, Pekný's 702-page book on the history of Jews in Bohemia and Moravia devotes only twelve pages to the postwar period.²⁴ Brod's fifteen-page article on

Jews in postwar Czechoslovakia focuses largely on the experiences of the “first” generation of the Holocaust survivors.²⁵ Peter Salner’s ethnographic study on Slovak Jews includes an informative chapter on the post-Holocaust and communist period, but the account does not specifically focus on experiences of the cohorts born after World War II.²⁶ The famous Jewish Museum in Prague also provides minimal information on the communist period, devoting to it only one display panel.

A similar situation prevails at the Jewish museum in the Slovak capital Bratislava. A Slovak-Swiss Jewish respondent, whom I had approached for this study, commented on her October 2001 visit to the Jewish Museum in Bratislava:

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

The data on which this book is based are drawn from seven main sources: (a) 195 semi-structured autobiographical replies to questionnaires from Czech and Slovak Jews of the “second”²⁷ generation currently living in Czech and Slovak Republics, various countries in Western Europe, Canada, Australia, the U.S. and Israel; (b) five focus group discussions with Czech and Slovak Jews of the postwar generation, which I conducted in 2002 and 2003 in Geneva, Prague, Toronto, London and Bratislava; (c) 13 interview transcripts of daughters of Czech Holocaust women survivors taped in 2001 and 2002, kindly made available to me by Ms. Pavla Frýdlová, the director of the Prague-based Gender Studies-sponsored research project called “Women’s Memory – Victims of the Holocaust;” (d) correspondence and personal interviews with some key participants in Czech and Slovak Jewish youth groups from the 1960s, and with respondents who missed the deadline for completing the questionnaire but who nonetheless wanted to share their personal stories with me; (e) archival sources; and (f) secondary data from existing comparative studies, websites, and personal memoirs, including data from the Slovak/Czech Jewish website www.chaverim.sk. Last but not least, I have also relied on my personal experiences as a Prague-born Czech Jew of the second generation, as a member of a Prague-based Jewish youth group from the 1960s, now called “Children of Maisel Street” (*Deti Maislovky*),²⁸ and as an August 1968 emigrant to the U.K. and (in 1975) to Canada.

As I have argued elsewhere, the use of a self-reflective methodology and the integration of sociological analyses with personal narratives and insights are “congruent with contemporary developments in feminist and postmodernist thought. Both feminism and postmodernism insist that location is central to the production of knowledge and that this should be made explicit.”²⁹ Thus, the personal is very much the sociological and the sociological is the personal in this book.

Data from Open-Ended, Semi-Structured Autobiographical Questionnaires

Data set (a) involves quantitative and qualitative data from 195 lengthy semi-structured autobiographical questionnaires. The questionnaire had eighty-seven questions. Respondents were asked to locate themselves in terms of following issues: vital statistics (including spouse’s nationality and Jewish descent); parental background (mixed parentage, secular or observant Jews, multilingual or Czech/ Slovak speaking, communist, anti-communist or apolitical); parental Holocaust experiences (concentration camps, exile, in hiding, living on false papers, anti-fascist armed struggle, or any combination of these); contact with surviving relatives in Czechoslovakia and abroad; parental (non)transmission of Holocaust experiences; parental experiences of communism; pivotal moments of Jewish self-recognition; personal experiences of otherness and anti-Semitism; attitudes towards Israel; participation in Jewish youth groups of the 1960s and early 1970s; and exilic experiences after 1968 (for those who emigrated). One section of the questionnaire was devoted to respondents’ parents, while another asked questions about their children, for those who had children. Respondents were instructed to supplement each of their marked fixed answers by lengthier commentaries and descriptions of their experiences, memories, and opinions. Almost two-thirds of the sampled respondents provided additional comments to marked answers, some quite lengthy and extensive, though not all respondents answered every question. Several respondents engaged with me in subsequent correspondence to clarify and expand on the information provided in the questionnaire.

In completing the questionnaire and adding short comments or whole mini-narratives, the respondents had to go through an important process of selection and analysis in deciding what to mark and

write. Their life-writing, and the views expressed during the five focus group discussions, therefore reveal important empirical and theoretical insights, which are much more extensive than those which could have been collected through a limited number of individual oral history interviews. Thus, beyond the next two context-setting chapters, it is on these grounds that the data from the questionnaires and the focus groups provide the most important evidence informing this study. As Margaret Somers,³⁰ Charlotte Linde,³¹ and David Maines³² point out, it is through narrativity that we come to comprehend and make sense of the social world, and it is largely through narratives that social identities are constituted. The biographical narrative method is also well suited to studying the generational impacts of historical watersheds on identity formation, as respondents tend themselves to “gravitate towards these periods in their accounts.”³³

Because of the tragic historical circumstances of the Holocaust and a large number of “hidden” Jews (i.e., those not affiliated with any Jewish organization), random statistical sampling was not possible. Instead, I had to rely on “snowball” (or the “pyramiding” method) of sampling. My starting point for the sampling was the previously mentioned group “Children of Maisel Street,” to which I belong. It consists of Czechs and some Slovaks of Jewish descent who, as high school and university students, attended regular educational meetings for Jewish youth in Prague’s old Jewish community town hall on Maisel Street during the period from 1966 to 1974. Half of the group emigrated after the 1968 Soviet invasion, but the life-long friendships established in the group led to a supportive transnational network of more than 100 people, maintained for over thirty-five years across and within several European countries (including, of course, Czechoslovakia), Canada, the U.S, Australia, and Israel. Since the collapse of communism in 1989, we have held four reunions in Prague, attended both by those who stayed and those who emigrated. All members of the group were sent a copy of the semi-structured questionnaire with a covering letter explaining the study, and requesting names and addresses of friends and acquaintances who met the criteria of the research project³⁴ and who agreed to have their addresses passed on to me. Many people who heard about the project through their personal networks approached me directly, and were subsequently sent the questionnaire.

The sampling of Slovak Jews also relied on the personal networks of Dr. Peter Salner, an ethnographer at the Ethnographic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the author of an excellent history and ethnography of modern Jewish life in Slovakia, and the chair of the Bratislava Jewish religious community. Notices about the study and the questionnaire were also placed in the internal publication of the largest Moravian Jewish community in Brno, and in the monthly newsletter of the Federation of Jewish Religious communities in the Czech lands and Slovakia, *Roš chodeš*. In the end, 420 questionnaires were sent by e-mail and regular mail during May–September 2002, and 195 of these were returned completed. This amounts to a very high response rate of 46 percent, which is especially impressive in view of the length of the questionnaire.

One hundred and sixteen (59 percent) of the respondents self-identified as Czech Jews and seventy-nine (41 percent) as Slovak Jews. Sixty-nine (59 percent) of the Czech sample were women and forty-seven (41 percent) men. The proportions were reversed in the Slovak sample, with thirty-one (39 percent) female and forty-eight (61 percent) male respondents. Overall, the sample achieved a remarkable gender balance—100 (51 percent) women and ninety-five (49 percent) men. The findings of numerous North American studies that women have greater interest in the past than men³⁵ therefore do not seem to apply to my Czech and Slovak Jewish respondents. (Unless otherwise stated, when I use generic terms such as “respondent” or “Czech/Slovak Jew” in this study, they refer both to men and women, and women or men in equal measure.)

As indicated in table 1.1, the majority of the sample were born in the aftermath of World War II—55 percent during 1945–1949 and 31

Table 1.1
Survey Respondents’ Years of Birth

Years	Czechs	Slovaks	Total
1940 – 44	7 (6%)	12 (15%)	19 (10%)
1945 – 49	62 (53%)	46 (58%)	108 (55%)
1950 – 54	40 (34%)	20 (25%)	60 (31%)
1955 – 60	7 (6%)	1 (2%)	8 (4%)

percent during 1951-55. Only 4 percent were born during 1956-1960. Among the nineteen respondents who were born during the war years 1940-44, a higher proportion was born in Slovakia. This reflects the higher rate of survival of Slovak Jews under the clerical fascist Tiso regime than was the case for Czech Jews under the German *Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren*, where hardly any Jewish children survived. All but one of the oldest Czech Jews in the sample were born abroad, mainly in the U.K. and the U.S. They returned to Czechoslovakia as small children with their parents after the war ended. One person among the oldest Czech cohort converted to Judaism as an adult, and therefore was not subject to any of the Nazi policies against the Jews.

The sample includes both those who emigrated and those who remained in Czechoslovakia: forty-two (53 percent) of respondents from the Slovak sample stayed and thirty-seven (47 percent) emigrated. However, seven (9 percent) of the migrants now reside in Prague, and were internal migrants at the time, that is, their migration occurred before 1993, when Czechoslovakia split into two separate countries. Thus, we can also restate the survey sample as consisting of forty-nine (62 percent) who remained and thirty (38 percent) who emigrated. Among the self-identified Czech Jews, forty (34 percent) remained in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic and seventy-six (66 percent) emigrated. Only one of the Czech Jewish émigrés now lives in the Slovak Republic, and this person also moved there well before 1993. Among the 106 emigrants who left Czechoslovakia, nineteen now reside in Israel, eighteen in Switzerland, seventeen in Canada, sixteen in Germany, ten in the U.K., with the rest divided among Australia, the U.S., France, Austria, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries.

The majority of the respondents – 172 (88 percent)—are married, with thirty-five (18 percent) in their second or subsequent marriages. Among the 101 self-identified married Czech Jews, close to a half—48 percent—married other Jews; twenty-one have as their partner another Czech Jew, six are married to a Slovak Jew, seven to an Israeli, and fourteen to a Jew of other nationality. Thirty-six married a Czech gentile and three a Slovak gentile, with the remaining fourteen marrying non-Jews of another nationality. The majority of those who married Jews or gentiles of non-Czech or non-Slovak nationalities are émigrés. Among the seventy-one self-identified married Slovak Jews, thirty-nine (49 percent) married other Jews, almost the

same percentage as among the Czech Jews. Twenty-three (32 percent) married Slovak Jews, six (8 percent) Czech Jews, three (4 percent) Israelis, and seven (9 percent) Jews of other nationalities. Seventeen (24 percent) are married to gentile Slovaks, seven (9 percent) to gentile Czechs, and eight (10 percent) to gentiles of other nationalities.

The 51-52 percent rate of intermarriage is relatively high, and exhibits few gender differences. Of the 101 married Czech Jews, twenty-six females and twenty-two males are married to other Jews, and among the Slovak Jews, the respective figures are fifteen and twenty-four. Somewhat surprisingly, no Slovak Jewess in the sample is married to a Czech gentile, while seven male Slovak Jews married Czech gentiles.³⁶ As we shall see in chapter 4, the high rate of intermarriage among Slovak Jewish respondents represents a significant departure from the marriage pattern among the parents' generation. However, when we compare the rate of intermarriage of the two generations of Czech Jews, the increase in intermarriage among the second generation is only slight.

In addition to the relatively high rates of intermarriage, the most striking characteristic of the sample is the high level of educational attainment. One hundred and sixty-four (84 percent) of the respondents have a completed university education. There is little difference in this respect among the Czech and Slovak respondents, and among émigrés and those who never left Czechoslovakia. Ninety-four (81 percent) of the sampled Czech Jews completed post-secondary education, compared with seventy (89 percent) of their Slo-

Table 1.2
Nationality/Ethnicity of Spouses/Partners of Survey Respondents

Nationality/Ethnicity of Spouses/Partners	All Females	Females		All Males	Males	
		Czech Jews	Slovak Jews		Czech Jews	Slovak Jews
Czech Jew	14	10	4	13	11	2
Slovak Jew	11	4	7	18	2	16
Israeli	4	3	1	6	4	2
Other Jew	12	9	3	9	5	4
Gentile Czech	20	20	-	23	16	7
Gentile Slovak	7	1	6	13	2	11
Other Gentile	9	9	n.a.	5	5	n.a.

vak Jewish counterparts. Among the forty self-identified Czech Jews who stayed, thirty-three (83 percent) have university education and, among the seventy-six who emigrated, sixty-one (80 percent) completed a university degree. Eighty-eight percent of those who stayed in Slovakia completed university education, compared to 89 percent of those who emigrated. The only difference of any significance is between Czech Jewish and Slovak Jewish females. Eighty-seven percent of all sampled Slovak Jewish females, but “only” 72 percent of all sampled Czech Jewish females, reported a completed university education. It is worth noting, however, that at least four of the Czech females are nurses or lab technicians with a completed post-secondary diploma education.³⁷ Two additional Czech Jewish respondents, one male and one female, reported that they were not allowed to enrol in a university an account of the dissident anti-communist activities of their parents.

Data from Focus Groups

The five focus groups discussions that inform the qualitative data set (b) were conducted by the author in Geneva and Prague in April 2002, in Toronto in September 2002, and in London and Bratislava in May 2003. Each group consisted of eight to twelve participants selected through snowball sampling similar to the one used for the questionnaires. Discussion typically started with an exchange of experiences from childhood and adolescence, and then proceeded either to experiences from emigration and re-emigration (among émigrés now living in Switzerland, Canada, and the U.K.) or to experiences of the “communist normalization” period after 1969 (in the Prague and Bratislava groups). Participants were grateful for the opportunity to share their experiences and interact with others of a similar background, since for many this was the first time that they had been able to reflect on their experiences with people they could trust. Participants in the Toronto group wanted to meet again, both to discuss some of these issues in greater depth, and to give voice to those who could not come to the first meeting.

The size of the Toronto group has now expanded to more than fifty, with a three to one ratio of Slovak to Czech Jews. It is named after the mystical Prague Jewish figure *Golem*. We regularly exchange e-mails on variety of topics, and meet regularly in individuals’ homes or at the University of Toronto³⁸ every two months or so to watch Czech and Slovak films, listen to lectures by volunteer speakers,