

Kateřina Čapková

## Beyond the Assimilationist Narrative: Historiography on the Jews of the Bohemian Lands and Poland after the Second World War\*

**Abstract:** By comparing the historiography on postwar Jewish history in the Bohemian Lands and Poland the article is an analysis of not only the differences but also, indeed especially, the similarities between the paradigms of interpretation used in interpreting the Jewish experience in the two regions. The author argues that whereas the concept of assimilation was widely criticized and rejected for the earlier periods of Jewish history, it still dominates the works on the period after the Second World War. Consequently, the existence and experience of religious Jews have either been neglected or marginalized, and the history of Jews—who are often seen as a rather monolithic group of people—is misleadingly told as a story of linear assimilation. The author suggests alternatives to those nationalist and often pro-socialist interpretations.

**Keywords:** Jews, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Communism, assimilation, religion, migration, border region, historiography, pluralism.

Since the emancipation period, historians have been asking questions about the advantages and disadvantages of the Jewish minority's process of adaptation to the majority European societies. The most prominent example of an alleged Jewish assimilation process has been Germany. For the German case, David Sorkin already challenged this model in the

\* I am very grateful to Kamil Kijek, Stephan Stach, Marcin Wodziński, and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. The research for it was supported by Grant No. 16-01775Y, “Inclusion of the Jewish Population into Postwar Czechoslovak and Polish Societies,” funded by the Czech Science Foundation.

late 1980s with his concept of subculture, and many other scholars have criticized the assimilationist narrative since then. Several key works by Tobias Brinkmann, Anne-Christin Saß, and others have also shown the impact of the east-European Jewish migrants on German pre-Shoah society, which have again questioned the linear assimilationist model. Similar research on the dynamic and complex processes in society also exists for other European and overseas countries. As for Poland and the Bohemian Lands, several historians have challenged the assimilationist model in their works on the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> I would argue, however, that the writing on Jewish history after the Second World War in east-central Europe (including Poland and the Bohemian Lands) is still suffering under the impact of assimilationist interpretation.

### **Research on Postwar Jewish History under the Communist Regime**

If one focuses on the historiography of the Polish and Czechoslovak Jews in the postwar period, one cannot but notice the huge disproportion between them. In contrast to hundreds of articles and dozens of books about the Jews of postwar Poland, research into the postwar history of the Jews of the Bohemian Lands lags far behind, with only a small number of academic works and very few specialists on the period. This disproportion has been especially obvious in the last forty years. Whereas in Poland already in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, dozens of articles and books were written about the postwar Jewish experience in Poland,

<sup>1</sup> For the Bohemian Lands, see Martina Niedhammer, *Nur eine "Geld-Emancipation"? Loyalitäten und Lebenswelten des Prager jüdischen Großbürgertums 1800–1867* (Göttingen, 2013); Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914*, 2nd rev. edn. (Lafayette, 2006); Hillel J. Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870–1918* (Oxford, 1988); Ines Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen: Eine Geschichte der tschechisch-jüdisch-deutschen Beziehungen in Prag (1918–1938)* (Munich, 2012); Kateřina Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*, trans. Derek and Marzia Paton (New York–Oxford, 2012). For Poland, see Marcin Wodziński, “Good Maskilim and Bad Assimilationists, or Toward a New Historiography of the Haskalah in Poland,” *Jewish Social Studies* 10 (2004), 3: 87–122; Agnieszka Jagodzińska, *Pomiędzy: Akulturacja Żydów Warszawy w drugiej połowie XIX wieku* (Wrocław, 2008); Katrin Steffen, *Jüdische Polonität: Ethnizität und Nation im Spiegel der polnischsprachigen jüdischen Presse 1918–1939* (Göttingen, 2004); Kamil Kijek, “Was It Possible to Avoid ‘Hebrew Assimilation?’ Hebraism, Polonization, and Tarbut Schools in the Last Decade of Interwar Poland,” *Jewish Social Studies* 21 (2016), 2: 105–141.

in Czechoslovakia in those years, writing about modern Jewish history (except for a few works about Theresienstadt) was off limits until after the Changes of 1989, and even since then few scholars have shown an interest in the topic (again with the exception of the Shoah, which became a research topic of the Terezín Initiative Institute, established in 1993). The roots of this phenomenon may lie in the earlier period of the immediate postwar years and in the differences in the legal standing of the Jews in the two countries.

In Poland, Jews were officially recognized as a national minority in the first postwar years. Also, after 1950, Jews in Poland (in contrast to Czechoslovakia) had a secular state-funded pro-Communist Jewish organization they could join—the Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów w Polsce (TSKŻ) [Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland]. Even though the TSKŻ was not an explicitly Jewish national organization, its focus on Jewish culture and secular Jewish identity implied that Jewishness goes beyond religion. In postwar Czechoslovakia (in contrast to the interwar period), Jews were not officially recognized as a national minority. They became yet another religious group in the country, and since 1950 no other organization except for the *kehilot* was available for Jews.

This also had an impact on the institutional framework for research on the Jews in the two countries. In Poland, the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (ŻIH) was established in 1947 by transforming the earlier Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland.<sup>2</sup> The ŻIH provided an institutional base for research on modern Jewish history with a special focus on the Shoah, and it has remained one of the centers of research on the modern period of Polish-Jewish history. In addition to the many books published by the ŻIH, its periodical *Bulletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* has been an important source of information for the general public in the country and abroad. Specialists on Jewish history inside and outside Poland could profit also from works published in Yiddish in *Bleter far geshikhte*, another ŻIH journal, which, however, because of the language barrier, was inaccessible to most of the Polish public.

<sup>2</sup> For the pre-history of the ŻIH, see Natalia Aleksiuń, “The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, 1944–1947,” *Polin* 20 (2008), 74–97. For the history of the ŻIH, see Andrzej Źbikowski, Ewa Biernacka (eds.), *Żydowski Instytut Historyczny: 50 lat działalności. Materiały z konferencji jubileuszowej* (Warsaw, 1996); Stephan Stach, “Geschichtsschreibung und politische Vereinnahmungen: Das Jüdische Historische Institut in Warschau 1947–1968,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts / Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 7 (2008), 401–431.

Not only did Czechoslovakia have no such research institution, but it was even impossible at Czech or Slovak universities to write about nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish history.<sup>3</sup> In 1965, the Jewish Museum in Prague started to publish *Judaica Bohemiae*, the only academic journal in Czechoslovakia where articles on Jewish topics could appear. But this journal was intended for readers outside the country as part of the new public-relations strategy of the Jewish Museum's director, Vilém Benda, to lead the museum out of the isolation it had experienced in the 1950s and early 1960s, and to promote the museum's activities in European countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, *Judaica Bohemiae* lacked (and still lacks) a distribution network in Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic). The emphasis on readers beyond the Czech(oslovak) borders is demonstrated also by the languages it publishes in. In the early years, its articles were in French or German, later sometimes also in Russian; in recent decades, English has been the dominant language, but Czech is absent. The obvious advantage was that Czechoslovak scholars were more read and better known abroad than Polish scholars writing in Polish and Yiddish.

Not only has the institutional framework been different, but in some respects so too has the content of research on the Jews. Even in *Judaica Bohemiae*, a specialist journal tailored for academics abroad, few articles have dealt with the Shoah, and almost all of those were about Theresienstadt and the Czech-speaking Jews interned there. Most of the articles were about subjects from the Middle Ages or the early modern period, which enabled the authors to avoid any thorny contemporary topics like Zionism or the State of Israel. Topics from the second half of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century were covered in only three articles in the journal. Most significantly, it published nothing on the postwar period.<sup>5</sup> Research on the modern Jewish history of the Bohemian Lands, including the postwar period, has therefore developed only slowly

<sup>3</sup> The exception is Vlastimila Hamáčková's MA thesis about the Czech-Jewish movement before the First World War, which she defended at Charles University in 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Magda Veselská, *Archa paměti: Cesta pražského židovského muzea pohnutým 20. stoletím* (Prague, 2012), 194–195. As Veselská writes, contact with people abroad could not be direct, so copies of *Judaica Bohemiae* were sent through the offices of the Prague City Council.

<sup>5</sup> Except for one article on the postwar Slovak Jewish community of Košice, published in 2005, the journal has yet to publish an article on the postwar period. This again stands in sharp contrast to *Bulletyn*, which published dozens of articles on the postwar period in the 1990s alone.

in the Czech Republic during the last twenty-six years, and more academic works on this period are still published in the United States, Germany, and Israel than in the country that is part of the focus of those articles.

One could plausibly argue that in this regard the situation in Poland did not differ much from the one in Czechoslovakia. Only limited research on the postwar years was done in Poland too, partly because this period was not yet understood as history. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is a difference. In contrast to the situation in the Bohemian Lands, not only were the Polish *Buletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* and *Bleter far geshikhte* focused on the history of the Shoah, but they also included a number of articles about the Communist/Socialist movement amongst the Jews and about the favorable attitude of the prewar Polish Communist party towards the Jews and their demands. There were also a few articles about the immediate postwar years in Poland.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the *Buletyn* and the *Bleter* had to adopt the same politicized approach to historical analysis as all other Polish academic publications at that time. Still, they and the ŽIH itself contributed at least something to public knowledge about the Shoah and the Jewish presence in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Nor did *Judaica Bohemiae* publish any article about the Czechoslovak Communist Party and the Jews. This was because such an article would have been contrary to Party policy in Czechoslovakia, which, in contrast to Poland, never accepted the idea of any Communist movement with a special message for Jews or any Jewish section in the Communist Party. Officially, the Czechoslovak Communist Party never made any distinction between people of different religious backgrounds, nor did it focus on Jewish Communists and Communist attitudes towards the Jews, for that would have been interpreted as Zionism or antisemitism, both of which Communist ideology was officially opposed to. Any research into Communism and the Jews would therefore be interpreted as criticism of the Party or as an expression of Zionist sentiments, or both.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the articles in *Bleter far geshikhte* up to 1970, with a division of the articles according to period, including the postwar period, see “Inhalt fun ‘Bleter far geshikhte’, band 1–18 (1948–1970),” in *Bleter far geshikhte* 20 (1981), 339–359.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the activities of the predecessor of the ŽIH, the Central Jewish Historical Commission, were path-breaking for the *khurban forshung* after the Second World War, as Jockusch has persuasively shown. See Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford, 2012), 18–45. See also Stephan Stach, “Walka klas w getcie? Badania nad Zagładą prowadzone w Żydowskim Instytucie Historycznym w Warszawie w okresie stalinowskim,” in Krzysztof Pilarczyk (ed.), *Żydzi i judaizm we współczesnych badaniach polskich* (Kraków, 2010), 5: 273–287.

Publications on postwar Jewish history in Poland focused primarily on Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia in the first postwar years where Jews (mostly repatriates from the Soviet Union) established a network of factories, agricultural cooperatives, and pro-Communist schools with Yiddish as the language of instruction.<sup>8</sup> At that time, this project (funded largely by the American Joint) was taken as proof that pro-Soviet Poland was successfully integrating its Jews into Socialist society. Even after 1950, when most of the Jewish leaders who had been in key positions in Lower Silesia departed from Poland in disappointment, the Polish government used the remaining Yiddish institutions in the region for state propaganda.<sup>9</sup> It is reasonable to assume that in the early postwar years and again in the 1960s this is what enabled scholars to write about pro-Communist Jews, especially those of Lower Silesia. Moreover, writing about the Jews of Lower Silesia could fit into the category of regional historiography and thus be less under state control.

Despite the disproportion, articles on twentieth-century Jewish history published in Communist Czechoslovakia and Poland do share several features. If historians (often Jews themselves) wanted to write about the Jews in their country, they had to follow the national (Polish or Czech, but never Jewish) Socialist model to Jewish history.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis was therefore on what the Nazis/Germans did to the Jews in addition to what they did to the Czechs and Poles, in order to make these articles fit into

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Bat, "Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku," *Rocznik Wrocławski* 5 (1961), 141–163; Arnold Goldsztejn, "Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1948" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wrocław, 1969); id., "Problem żydowski w pierwszych latach Dolnego Śląska," *Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny "Sobótka"* 17 (1962): 2a (series B), 169–172; Tomasz Szarota, *Osadnictwo miejskie na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1948* (Wrocław, 1969); Szyja Bronsztejn, "Uwagi o ludności żydowskiej na Dolnym Śląsku w pierwszych latach po wyzwoleniu," *Bulletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 75 (1970), 31–45; Kazimierz Pudło, "Wybrane problemy z procesu przemian w środowisku żydowskim na Dolnym Śląsku (1945–1968)," *Rocznik Dolnośląski* 11 (1988), 103–115. For a detailed bibliography of works on the Jews of Silesia including the postwar period, see Marcin Wodziński, *Bibliography on the History of Silesian Jewry II – Bibliographie zur Geschichte der Juden in Schlesien II* (Munich, 2004), 62–71.

<sup>9</sup> Until 1968, when the Yiddish language high school was closed down, official visitors to Communist Poland from Cuba and the Soviet Union, or Communist journalists from Western countries, travelled from Warsaw to Wrocław to visit this symbol of successful Jewish integration into Communist society. See Szyja Bronsztejn, *Z dziejów ludności żydowskiej na Dolnym Śląsku po II wojnie światowej* (Wrocław, 1993), 36.

<sup>10</sup> On the strength of nationalism in historiography under Communist regimes, see Michal Kopeček, "Historical Studies of Nation-Building and the Concept of Socialist Patriotism in East Central Europe 1956–1970," in Pavel Kolář, Miloš Řezník (eds.), *Historische Nationsforschung im geteilten Europa 1945–1989* (Cologne, 2012), 121–136.

the Czech and Polish national master narratives that were of key importance for the local Communists.<sup>11</sup> Also, in all the writing about modern Jewish history published from the 1950s to the 1980s, Jews were depicted as loyal citizens, patriots, and people who already had a lukewarm attitude to religion, seeing it as something backward, ghetto-like.

In the Bohemian Lands, the Socialist/Communist vision of the “solution to the Jewish Question” greatly resembled the nineteenth-century assimilationist model. With regard to Poland, the assumption that Jews were a specific ethnic group was still dominant at least until the early 1950s. Since nationalist pressure for homogenization was prevalent in Poland from the end of the Second World War onwards, the recognition of Jewish nationality tended to become a burden as the Jews’ national loyalty and patriotism were questioned. From the 1950s and especially from the 1970s onwards, national assimilation was officially required of the Jews in both countries. Assimilation meant national loyalty to the dominant nation—in the linguistic, cultural, and political sense.

With the collapse of the Communist regimes in the late 1980s, the political pressure to write about Jews in this political paradigm vanished. For Poland, we have several unique works from the last fifteen years, which focus on Yiddish culture and Jewish nationalism in its different forms in the postwar period.<sup>12</sup> Yet, surprisingly, recent historiography still tends to interpretations that are loyal, consciously or unconsciously, to the Socialist model, which, in turn, incorporated the nationalist narrative. I have identified two interconnected topics that are frequently part of the interpretation, and both are related to the assimilationist narrative.

<sup>11</sup> For the Holocaust discussion in Communist Czechoslovakia, see Peter Hallama, *Nationale Helden und jüdische Opfer: Tschechische Repräsentationen des Holocaust* (Göttingen, 2015); for Poland, see Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979* (Athens, 2003); for the discussion in the Soviet bloc, see Thomas C. Fox, “The Holocaust under Communism,” in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York, 2004), 420–439.

<sup>12</sup> See Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov, *Obywatel Jidyszlandu: Rzecz o żydowskich komunistach w Polsce* (Warsaw, 2009); Magdalena Ruta, *Bez Żydów? Literatura jidysz w PRL o Zagładzie, Polsce i komunizmie* (Kraków, 2012); Grzegorz Berendt, *Życie żydowskie w Polsce w latach 1950–1956: Z dziejów Towarzystwa Społeczno-Kulturalnego Żydów w Polsce* (Gdańsk, 2006); Piotr Peziński, *Na rozdrożu: Młodzież żydowska w PRL 1956–1968* (Warsaw, 2014). Several works focus on the first postwar years, including Natalia Aleksiu, *Dokąd dalej? Ruch syjonistyczny w Polsce (1944–1950)* (Warsaw, 2002); Daniel Blatman, *For Our Freedom and Yours: The Jewish Labour Bund in Poland 1939–1949* (London–Portland, 2003); Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–1948* (Cambridge, 2014).

## Center and Periphery: Czechoslovakia

One feature of this prevailing model of interpretation is the marginalization of and, often, disrespect for religious Jews. Concerning the Bohemian Lands, few works have actually dealt with local Jews rather than with the attitude of the State towards the Jews or with diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel.<sup>13</sup> One of the exceptions is *In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism* by Alena Heitlinger, who analyzed more than 200 questionnaires filled in by Czech and Slovak Jews born between 1940 and 1960.<sup>14</sup> They replied to Heitlinger's questions at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Up to a point, it is reasonable to compare her project with that of Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, a Polish sociologist who asked questions surprisingly similar to Heitlinger's.<sup>15</sup> Both scholars were interested primarily in questions of identity and therefore inquired extensively about nationality, religion, language, and experiences of antisemitism. The major difference is that Hurwic-Nowakowska conducted her research immediately in the first postwar years, whereas Heitlinger did so half a century later among members of the second generation, and most of their replies are based on childhood memories.

Heitlinger's book is important for anyone studying Czechoslovak postwar Jewish history. It also serves, however, as a good example of a typical

<sup>13</sup> See Jiří Dufek, Karel Kaplan, Vladimír Šlosar, *Československo a Izrael v letech 1947–1953* (Prague–Brno, 1993); Karel Kaplan, *Zpráva o zavraždění generálního tajemníka* (Prague, 1992); Peter Meyer, "Czechoslovakia," in Peter Meyer et al. (eds.), *The Jews in the Soviet Satellites* (Syracuse, 1953), 49–206; Jacob Labendz, "Re-Negotiating Czechoslovakia. The State and the Jews in Communist Central Europe: The Czech Lands, 1945–1990" (Ph.D. dissertation, Washington University in St. Louis, 2014); Marie Bulínová et al. (eds.), *Československo a Izrael v letech 1945–1956: Dokumenty* (Prague, 1993); Helaine Debra Blumenthal, "Fourteen Convicted, Three Million Condemned: The Slansky Affair and the Reconstitution of Jewish Identities after the Holocaust" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2012); Kevin McDermott, "A 'Polyphony of Voices'? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slánský Affair," *Slavic Review* 67 (2008), 4: 840–865; Martin Štok, "Every Jew is a Zionist, and every Zionist is a Spy! The Story of Jewish Social Assistance Networks in Communist Czechoslovakia," *East European Jewish Affairs* 44 (2014), 1: 70–83; Jan Lániček, *Czechs, Slovaks and the Jews, 1938–48: Beyond Idealization and Condemnation* (Hounds-mills–New York, 2013); Monika Hanková, "Die jüdische Religionsgemeinschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg," in Martin Schulze Wessel, Martin Zückert (eds.), *Handbuch der Religions- und Kirchengeschichte der böhmischen Länder und Tschechiens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2009), 741–755.

<sup>14</sup> Alena Heitlinger, *In the Shadows of the Holocaust and Communism: Czech and Slovak Jews since 1945* (New Brunswick–London, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, *Żydzi polscy (1947–1950): Analiza więzi społecznej ludności żydowskiej* (Warsaw, 1996), 108.

perspective taken in research on the Jews of the Bohemian Lands in the postwar period. Of her interviewees, 119 identified themselves as Czech Jews (the rest as Slovak Jews), and most of those were part of a network established in the 1960s when the leadership of the Prague Jewish Community had started to organize various lecture series about Jewish culture, religion, and history. For many of those young people, this was the first opportunity to meet other Jews and discuss their often only recently discovered Jewishness. They called themselves the “children of Maislovka,” after the name of the Prague street in which the Jewish town hall where they met is located. In her book, Heitlinger, who was part of the group, concludes that most of the postwar Czech Jews were secular, deeply rooted in the Czech language and Czech traditions, had mostly become aware of their Jewish identity only because other people had identified them as Jews, and had mostly perceived their Jewishness as a stigma in Communist society.<sup>16</sup> Though this image of Jews in the Bohemian Lands is perfectly compatible with the Czech nationalist narrative and fits in well with the self-image of the Czech Jewish community, it is distorted.

One comes to completely different conclusions once the perspective has been broadened from beyond Prague to the border regions. Nearly half of the postwar Jews of the Bohemian Lands were migrants who had lived mostly in Subcarpathian Ruthenia or eastern Slovakia before the war and had come to the Bohemian Lands because the Soviet Union had annexed Subcarpathian Ruthenia in 1945, and also because of the destruction of their Jewish communities during the war. Most of them decided to settle in the border regions of northern and western Bohemia, from where the German-speaking population had just been expelled and where many job opportunities and vacant flats were now appeared. The migration of the Subcarpathian Jews into postwar Bohemia was spontaneous, and the Czechoslovak government opposed it.<sup>17</sup> Many of those Jews had to wait for Czechoslovak citizenship for years; some of them decided to leave for the American DP camps in Germany. Nevertheless, several thousands decided to stay and re-establish Jewish communities in the border region.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Heitlinger, *In the Shadows*, esp. 205–208.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this, see Kateřina Čapkova, “Dilemmas of Minority Politics: Jewish Migrants in Post-War Czechoslovakia and Poland,” in Manfred Gerstenfeld, Françoise Ouzan (eds.), *Displacement, Jewish Migration and Rebirth of Communities (1945–1967)* (Leiden–Boston, 2014), 63–75.

<sup>18</sup> In the JDC reports it is estimated that in 1948 there were about 20,000 Jews in the Bohemian Lands out of whom 8,000 were from Subcarpathian Ruthenia. In Slovakia

Apart from Prague, most of the major Jewish communities in Bohemia were situated (as in the interwar period) in what before the war had been called the Sudetenland. In the postwar period, however, more than 90 per cent of the members of those communities were Jews from Subcarpathian Ruthenia, and they shaped these new Jewish communities by introducing traditions very different from those of the prewar period. In a report from mid-1946, Israel J. Jacobson, the head of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Czechoslovakia wrote:

The Council of Jewish Communities of Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia has been trying to arrange for every community with a substantial number of Jews, especially where there now reside Jews from Slovakia and Sub-Carpathia, to have the services of a *shochet* . . . The communities received *megilot* for Purim, and *hagadot* and *machzorim* for Passover. A few *taleisim* were also supplied, but the demand for *taleisim*, *tefilin*, *mezuzot* and *tsitsiot* could not be met because of the unavailability of these articles in Czechoslovakia. The Council aided the various Jewish communities in installing *mikvot*, covering both capital costs and current expenses. . . . It is hoped that by the end of this year *mikvot* will be established throughout the Czech Lands wherever Jews from Eastern countries now reside and wish to observe “*taharat nashim*.<sup>19</sup>”

As this report reveals, the JDC helped, through the good offices of the Council of Jewish Communities, to build up a postwar infrastructure for the practice of the Jewish religion, which had been almost totally absent in the Bohemian Lands since the second half of the nineteenth century.

From interviews with members of those communities in the border regions, their private archives, and documents from those communities, one gets a totally different picture of the postwar Jewish experience in Bohemia than the one offered by Heitlinger. Most of those families kept kosher, some children had Yiddish names in the privacy of their homes and Czech names outside, and there was a strong sense of Jewish solidarity

there were allegedly 30,000 Jews; see AJJDC, Geneva Collection 1945–1954, Country Directors Conference Part I 1948, Draft of Report of Julius Levine – Czechoslovakia, 6 April 1948, Item ID 2545061. The number of Jews who came from (eastern) Slovakia and settled mostly also in the border regions is unknown. They had no problems in getting or reobtaining Czechoslovak citizenship, so the JDC had no reason to distinguish them from the local Czech Jews. The JDC reports from the middle of the 1960s suggest that there were 16,000 Jews in the country (there is no distinction for the Subcarpathian Jews who, if they stayed, soon received their Czechoslovak citizenship), see AJJDC, New York Collection, 1965–1974, Czechoslovakia: General, 1965–1975, Untitled Typewritten Document, 9 February 1965, item ID 1006211.

<sup>19</sup> AJJDC, Czechoslovakia, R 45/54-200, Research Department Report No. 32, based on the analysis of Israel J. Jacobson for December 1946–March 1947, published 7 July 1947.

and of belonging to a precious tradition and community. In Ústí nad Labem the cantor from Slovakia led an after-school *cheder* for the boys of the local community until the early 1960s.

This story of people from the periphery, who knew Yiddish or Hungarian better than they knew Czech, were religious, and were mostly craftsmen or manual workers, is still not acknowledged as an integral part of Czech-Jewish postwar history.<sup>20</sup> The few studies on Jewish communities in this Bohemian border region end mostly with the year 1945 or 1948.<sup>21</sup> An article, by David Gerlach, about Jews in the border regions surprisingly fails to mention the Carpathian Jewish immigrants.<sup>22</sup> Recently, several important books were published on the resettlement movement in the Bohemian border region.<sup>23</sup> In these works the existence of Jews in the region is ignored or mentioned only briefly. This seems odd also when one looks at the map of the ten Jewish communities of the Czech Republic today. Five of them (Teplice, Děčín, Ústí nad Labem, Liberec, and Karlovy Vary) are in the former Sudetenland, and have survived only thanks to the Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia and eastern Slovakia.

Obviously, deleting religious, traditional, often Yiddish-speaking Jews from the self-image of the Jews of the Bohemian Lands is not something

<sup>20</sup> Nor does Monika Hanková, in her overview article on the postwar Jews of the Bohemian Lands, mention the contribution of the Subcarpathian Jews to the revival of Jewish religious life in the region. The same applies to the Ph.D. dissertation of Jacob Labendz. See Hanková, “Die jüdische Religionsgemeinschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg,” and Labendz, “Re-Negotiating Czechoslovakia.”

<sup>21</sup> Vladimír Kaiser (ed.), *Intolerance: Češi, Němci a Židé na Ústecku 1938–1948. Edice dokumentů z fondu Archivu města Ústí nad Labem* (Ústí nad Labem, 1998); Zlatuše Kukánová, Lenka Matušková, “Demografická struktura židovských náboženských obcí v severních Čechách v letech 1945–1949,” in *Terezínské studie a dokumenty* (Prague, 1997), 89–98; Józef Szymeczek, “Die Schicksale der Teschener Juden nach 1945,” in *Die Juden im Sudetenland* (Prague, 2000), 301–311; Jitka Chmelíková, *Osudy chebských Židů: Chebskí Židé od 2. poloviny 19. století do současnosti* (Cheb, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> David Gerlach, “Juden in den Grenzgebieten: Minderheitenpolitik in den Böhmisches Ländern nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* (2008), 12–47.

<sup>23</sup> Andreas Wiedemann, “*Komm mit uns das Grenzland aufbauen!*” *Ansiedlung und neue Strukturen in den ehemaligen Sudetengebieten 1945–1952* (Essen, 2007); Matěj Spurný, *Nejsou jako my: Česká společnost a menšiny v pohraničí (1945–1960)* (Prague, 2011); Eagle Glassheim, “Ethnic Cleansing, Communism, and Environmental Devastation in Czechoslovakia’s Borderlands, 1945–1989,” *The Journal of Modern History* 78 (2006), 1: 65–92; František Čapka, Lubomír Slezák, Jaroslav Vaculík, *Nové osídlení pohraničí českých zemí po druhé světové válce* (Brno, 2005); Adrian von Arburg, “Abschied und Neubeginn: Der Bevölkerungswechsel in den Sudetengebieten nach 1945,” in Włodzimierz Borodziej (ed.), *Als die Deutschen weg waren: Was nach der Vertreibung geschah. Ostpreußen, Schlesien, Sudetenland* (Berlin, 2005), 185–220.

we should ascribe only to the Socialist disregard for religious people. Writing about the high rate of inclusion of the Bohemian Jews into local society has a long tradition in the historiography on the Jews of the Bohemian Lands, and is, after all, understandable if we consider the unusually great number of “intermarriages” in the period before the Second World War.<sup>24</sup> Thousands of Jewish migrants from Carpathian Ruthenia and eastern Slovakia to the Bohemian border regions after the war<sup>25</sup> therefore constitute a big challenge not only for historians but also for many local Jews in or from the Bohemian Lands, for whom the Jewish religion (especially Hasidic) is not compatible with the image of allegedly modern, forward-looking Bohemian Jews.

### **Center and Periphery: Poland**

Thanks to the great amount of academic research on postwar Polish-Jewish history, the picture we get of it is far more balanced than Czech- (or Bohemian-) Jewish history of the same period. Still, the overall image of the postwar Polish-Jewish experience is mostly shaped by works on the Jews of Warsaw, on Jewish attitudes to Communism, and on antisemitism.<sup>26</sup> Focusing on the Jews of Warsaw, however, narrows down the wide range of Jewish identities to include only the most secular.

In contrast to Czechoslovakia, the history of the Jews on the periphery in Poland—in Lower Silesia—was, as we have seen, a research topic even

<sup>24</sup> Of new marriages in Czechoslovakia between 1928 and 1933 in which at least one of the partners declared the Jewish religion, about 19 per cent were with somebody with no Jewish religious affiliation. In Bohemia, however, this proportion was 43.8 per cent, in Moravia 30 per cent, in Slovakia only 9.2 per cent, and in Subcarpathian Ruthenia a negligible 1.3 per cent. See Meyer, “Czechoslovakia,” 54–55.

<sup>25</sup> There were Jewish migrants from Subcarpathian Ruthenia and eastern Slovakia in the Bohemian Lands even before the Second World War, but they never managed to have any considerable impact on the reform character of the Jewish communities there. They were, however, the most frequent visitors of the Old New Synagogue in Prague and some of them were asked to help with the religious education of children. In Prague, several students from Subcarpathian Ruthenia used this opportunity during their studies.

<sup>26</sup> See Karen Auerbach, *The House at Ujazdowskie 16: Jewish Families in Warsaw after the Holocaust* (Bloomington, 2013); Michał Bilewicz, Bogna Pawlisz (eds.), *Żydzi i komunizm* (Warsaw, 2000); August Grabski, *Działalność komunistów wśród Żydów w Polsce (1944–1949)* (Warsaw, 2004); id. (ed.), *Żydzi a lewica: Zbiór studiów historycznych* (Warsaw, 2007); Krystyna Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, komunizm: Anatomia półprawdy 1939–1968* (Warsaw, 1992); Jaff Schatz, *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Berkeley, 1991); Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation’s Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven, 2006).

in Communist times, though religious Jews are ignored in these works, and except for the descriptive research done by Ewa Waszkiewicz,<sup>27</sup> the new research on Lower Silesia published after 1990 or in Israel before then also focuses mostly on Jewish secular life.<sup>28</sup> As in research carried out in Czechoslovakia, another reason for omitting religious Jews is the lack of records in the state archives. Historians still tend to rely more on official archive documents than on private documents and interviews which reveal activities and experiences of Jews who had been oppressed by the regime and therefore also appear only randomly in the archives.

The Jewish communities in the border regions of the Bohemian Lands were significant, but none of them surpassed the Jewish community in Prague (where, however, about one thousand Jews from Subcarpathian Ruthenia settled as well). In Poland the Jewish population of Lower Silesia greatly outnumbered that of Warsaw. Lower Silesia was annexed to Poland only at the end of the war; the local Germans were expelled, and most of the German-speaking Jewish survivors left the region as well.<sup>29</sup> As part of the repatriation of prewar Polish citizens from the Soviet Union, trains with Polish Jews were sent primarily to Lower Silesia in 1946–1947 and again in 1956. In spring 1947, 47 per cent of all Jews living in Poland were registered in Lower Silesia (in contrast to only 6.3 per cent in the Warsaw Voivodeship).<sup>30</sup> The great number of Jewish “repatriates,” together with

<sup>27</sup> Ewa Waszkiewicz, *Kongregacja Wyznania Mojżeszowego na Dolnym Śląsku na tle polityki wyznanowej Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej, 1945–1968* (Wrocław, 1999). For Upper Silesia, see Wojciech Jaworski, “Jewish Religious Communities in Upper Silesia 1945–1970,” in Marcin Wodziński, Janusz Spyra (eds.), *Jews in Silesia* (Kraków, 2001), 247–263; though religious life also plays an important role in a work by Katharina Friedla, the story of the German-speaking Jews that she focuses on ends only a few years after the war. See Katharina Friedla, *Juden in Breslau/Wroclaw 1933–1949: Überlebensstrategien, Selbstbehauptung und Verfolgungserfahrungen* (Cologne, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Hana Shlomi, “Reshit ha-hityashvut ha-yehudit bi-Shlezye ha-taḥtit (1945),” *Gal-Ed* 7–8 (1985), 161–197; ead., “The Reception and Settlement of Jewish Repatriants from the Soviet Union in Lower Silesia, 1946,” *Gal-Ed* 17 (2000), 85–104; Bożena Szaynok, *Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku 1945–1950* (Wrocław, 2000); Frank Golczewski, “Die Ansiedlung von Juden in den ehemaligen deutschen Ostgebieten Polens 1945–1951,” in Micha Brumlik, Karol Sauerland (eds.), *Umdeuten, verschweigen, erinnern: Die späte Aufarbeitung des Holocaust in Osteuropa* (Frankfurt am Main, 2010), 91–114; Helga Hirsch, *Gehen oder bleiben? Juden in Schlesien und Pommern 1945–1957* (Göttingen, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Friedla, *Juden in Breslau/Wroclaw 1933–1949*; Kateřina Čapková, “Germans or Jews? German-Speaking Jews in Poland and Czechoslovakia after World War II,” *Jewish History Quarterly* (2013), 2: 348–362.

<sup>30</sup> Bożena Szaynok, “Migrationen der polnischen Juden in den Jahren 1944–1959,” in Witold Sienkiewicz, Grzegorz Hryciuk (eds.), *Zwangsumsiedlung, Flucht und Vertreibung 1939–1959: Atlas zur Geschichte Ostmitteleuropas* (Bonn, 2010), 147.

more Jews from the Polish interior who had decided to settle in this region after the war, not only made the dense infrastructure of secular Jewish institutions in Lower Silesia possible; it also contributed to making it a region with the strongest Jewish religious communities in the country.<sup>31</sup>

The specific features of Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia become obvious also from the work of Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, who conducted sociological research similar to Alena Heitlinger's. For many reasons, however, Hurwic-Nowakowska's research is far more comprehensive than Heitlinger's. The first reason for that is its scope: whereas Heitlinger had somewhat more than 200 respondents, Hurwic-Nowakowska received answers from more than 800 people. And, as we have seen, she did her research from 1947 to 1950, and thus the answers relate to present experiences rather than those of childhood. And third, Hurwic-Nowakowska has chosen three cities for her research: Warsaw, Łódź, and Dzierżoniów (in Lower Silesia), which has enabled her to show the huge discrepancy between the three localities. Even if she was not particularly interested in those differences and tended to discuss broader trends among the Polish Jews, her book offers clear evidence that the circumstances of Jewish life in Warsaw and especially in Lower Silesia differed enormously. First, there were differences in language: most Jews in Warsaw spoke Polish; those who knew Yiddish claimed to have no opportunity to speak it in Warsaw. In Łódź, and especially in Dzierżoniów, people were speaking Yiddish on the street as well as at home. Regarding education: 40 per cent of all the respondents from Warsaw had a university education, whereas only 4 per cent of the Jews of Dzierżoniów did; most of the latter worked in factories or as craftsmen. The last major difference has to do with attitudes to religion. Unlike Warsaw, Dzierżoniów had a very important Orthodox Jewish community in addition to the pro-Socialist Jews (a division that was blurred).

Hurwic-Nowakowska acknowledges the existence of religious Jews in the region, but in keeping with the Socialist disdain for religion, she marginalizes and belittles their role in Jewish settlement. She recalls meeting women with wigs, who were celebrating the Shabbat in a traditional way, which was obviously something new to her. Even though she has many quotations from Jews of Dzierżoniów, and to a lesser extent from Łódź, about the importance of religion in their lives, Hurwic-Nowakowska, a member

<sup>31</sup> Waszkiewicz, *Kongregacja Wyznania Mojżeszowego na Dolnym Śląsku*.

of the Socialist movement already in the interwar period, reveals her prejudices in her otherwise meticulously academic work: she claims that the religious Jews have a “ghetto attitude (*postawa*)” and is sure that there will soon be no such Jews.<sup>32</sup> She applies the Socialist ideal of assimilation to the Polish Jews and marginalizes the importance of religious Jews in the country. We should, however, also bear in mind that she wrote her book during the rise of Stalinism in Poland.

Surprisingly, this tone of disdain for the Orthodox Jews appears also in a recent ŻIH publication, *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów: Polska 1944–2010*, which was published in English translation by Yad Vashem in 2014.<sup>33</sup> In their contribution to this volume of more than 1,000 pages, which aspires to be the authoritative work on the subject, August Grabski and Albert Stankowski, writing about Jewish religious life in postwar Poland, quote precisely Hurwic-Nowakowska’s problematic sentences about the alleged ghetto attitude of the Orthodox Jews, and claim that those Jews were “the last of the Mohicans.”<sup>34</sup>

In a recent article, Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak also claims that the linguistic assimilation and the religious one of postwar Polish Jewry were inevitable because they were part of the process of modernization.<sup>35</sup> She bases her argument on the research of Anna Landau-Czajka, who, in her book on the interwar period, also judges Jews’ leaving their religion as a step towards modernity.<sup>36</sup>

In sum, both historiographies—that on the Jews of the Bohemian Lands and that of the Jews of Poland in the postwar period—consider the Jewish religion (especially in its Orthodox or Hasidic form) to be opposed to progress and modernity. Whereas historians researching the Bohemian Lands omit such Jews from their research, historians of the Jews of Poland tend to disregard the religious Jews as ghetto-like. Such prejudices amongst

<sup>32</sup> Hurwic-Nowakowska, *Żydzi polscy*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Feliks Tych, Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów: Polska 1944–2010* (Lublin, 2012); eid. (eds.), *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland 1944–2010* (Jerusalem, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> August Grabski, Albert Stankowski, “Życie religijne społeczności żydowskiej,” in Tych, Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów*, 222–223.

<sup>35</sup> Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, “Asymilacja do polskości jako strategia adaptacyjna ocalanych z Zagładą polskich Żydów,” *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* (2013), 2: 240.

<sup>36</sup> Anna Landau-Czajka, “*Syn będzie Lech...*: Asymilacja Żydów w Polsce międzywojennej

(Warsaw, 2006), 438. In contrast to Landau-Czajka, Katrin Steffen, in her thoughtful work, writes about “Jewish Polishness” in order to show that this was not a one-dimensional process of assimilation. Steffen, *Jüdische Polonität*.

historians towards religious Jews are unacceptable, not only because they constitute a lack of openness towards different forms of religious traditions, but also because the existing academic research clearly points to the many modern characteristic features of the Hasidic movement and other ultra-Orthodox traditions. Already in the nineteenth century, all of these religious Jews were using modern media like the printing press and were publishing books to spread their ideas; they successfully entered the arena of modern politics, and also managed to be economically independent. Moreover, Hasidism, as well as ultra-Orthodoxy, experienced its greatest growth only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (before the Shoah), and can therefore be considered recent movements.<sup>37</sup>

### **Assimilation**

The history of the Jews of the postwar Bohemian Lands and postwar Poland has also often been described as the story of the steady disappearance of the Jews: on the one hand because of the several waves of emigration and, on the other, because of the assimilation of those who remained. The picture of Europe, particularly, east-central Europe, in which there was no future for the Jews after the Second World War was dominant especially in Israeli and American historiographies, and coincided with both the Zionist and the Cold War perspective.

True, the Jewish population of Europe, so terribly reduced during the Second World War, decreased even further because of the considerable emigration after the war. In the first postwar years, about half of the Jews of Czechoslovakia and of Poland left their countries, often for a combination of reasons, including the foundation of the State of Israel. Other waves of emigration followed in the 1950s and the 1960s, before the borders were closed again. After 1967–1968, emigration, which had quite different causes in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the number of Jews in both countries declined radically. This was a clearly disastrous demographic development for both countries, but especially

<sup>37</sup> See Moshe Rosman, “Hasidism as a Modern Phenomenon: The Paradox of Modernization without Secularization,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts / Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 6 (2007), 215–224; Michael K. Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (New York–Jerusalem, 1992), 23–84. See also Marcin Wodziński’s article in this issue.

for Poland, considering that before the war there were about as many Jews in prewar Warsaw alone as in the whole Czechoslovakia (including Subcarpathian Ruthenia).<sup>38</sup> Bearing in mind this disproportion in the numbers of Jews in the two countries before the war, it is shocking to see the comparable number of only a few thousand Jews in Poland and in Czechoslovakia in about 1990. Nevertheless, is this reason enough to talk about a “vanishing Diaspora,” as Bernard Wasserstein suggests in his influential book?<sup>39</sup>

Most of the research on postwar Jewish history in Poland and the Bohemian Lands supports this idea by claiming that those who remained then “assimilated.” But there is an interesting difference. The assimilation of the Jews of the Bohemian Lands is widely seen as a natural and successful process which the Jews themselves were in favor of. In a 1993 article, Yeshayahu A. Jelinek discusses antisemitism and nationalism in Slovakia. In contrast to that, regarding the Bohemian Lands he states:

Racism, whether in anti-Jewish or anti-Asian forms, will remain for the time being, but will probably afflict only segments of Czech society. Given the intense assimilation of Jews in Bohemia-Moravia, and the absence of religious Jews, major problems from that area are unlikely.<sup>40</sup>

Petr Brod, in an article about Czech-Jewish emigration in 1948 and in 1968, emphasizes the long-term process of assimilation from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards:

After 1848 a strong process of assimilation began. This means that the Jewish population has adapted to the environment by language, way of life, education, and so forth, and to some extent assimilates with it. This is partly a spontaneous process and partly a conscious effort.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> In Warsaw, there were 352,000 Jews in 1931 and 375,000 in 1939. See Antony Polonsky, “Warsaw,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Warsaw> [retrieved: 15 Mar. 2015]; according to the 1930 census (the last Czechoslovak census before the Second World War), there were 356,830 people of the Jewish faith in Czechoslovakia. See Peter Brod, Kateřina Čapková, Michal Frankl, “Czechoslovakia,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Czechoslovakia> [retrieved: 15 Mar. 2015].

<sup>39</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe since 1945* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, “Historical and actual minority problems in Czechoslovakia,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 27 (1993), 1: 96. Another clear message of his statement is again that religious Jews may cause problems.

<sup>41</sup> Petr Brod, “Dvě emigrační vlny židů z Československa,” paper given at the “Krajané a exil: 1948 a 1968” conference, the Karolinum, Prague, 16–17 September 2008, <http://www.zahraničniceci.com/docs/brod-exil.pdf> [retrieved: 3 Jan. 2016].

In Polish historiography interpretations of assimilation vary. Some historians describe the postwar assimilation as a process that is a result of the genocide of the Jews and also of pressure from the pro-Soviet governments, but it has, they argue, also been an unsuccessful process, because of Polish antisemitism. An example of such writing is Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak's article, whose title translates as "Assimilation to Polishness as an Adaptation Strategy of Polish Holocaust Survivors."<sup>42</sup> As the basis of her analysis, she has chosen the concept of "cultural trauma." The concept comes from Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka, who used it to describe a situation in which an individual or a group of people experience the destruction of their previous way of life and way of looking at the world. This was clearly the situation of the Polish Shoah survivors just after the war. The next step Koźmińska-Frejlak takes in her argument comes as a surprise, however, when she combines Sztompka's concept with the research of Hurwic-Nowakowska, who claimed that the traditional ties of Jewish society, which would have enabled Jews to develop their distinctiveness, were no longer functional after the war.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, Koźmińska-Frejlak concludes that in the circumstances of cultural trauma and in the absence of traditional ties to the Jewish community Jews assimilated linguistically and religiously.<sup>44</sup> She admits that there were people "of stable Jewish identity," some of whom hoped to develop their Jewish culture and tradition in Poland (especially in Lower Silesia) as it had been before the war; most of them, however, were disappointed and left the country: "Only a few stayed, and they were soon acculturated."<sup>45</sup>

Koźmińska-Frejlak then focuses on baptism among the Jews, the acceptance of antisemitism among assimilated Polish Jews, and mixed marriages. Full integration, however, is possible, she argues, only if the majority is willing to absorb the group. This was not the case for Polish society as a whole. Consequently, few Jews ultimately managed to feel Polish and behave as Poles do, and therefore few wanted to remain Polish.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Koźmińska-Frejlak, "Asymilacja do polskości."

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 240. This is an assumption that can hardly be taken seriously. Many Jewish communities and prewar Jewish institutions were of course destroyed by the genocide, yet some were re-established, and new institutions—especially the Jewish National Committees and, later, branches of the TSKŻ—were established as distinctive Jewish institutions.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 247.

However valuable in and of itself, her work provides a litmus test of how far historiography on the Jews of postwar Poland and Czechoslovakia remains under the influence of the nationalist paradigm. Also typical of this type of writing is the division of Jews into groups according to their willingness to assimilate. Brod distinguishes three groups in postwar Czechoslovakia: Zionists, Assimilationists (including, he claims, Orthodox Jews), and Activists, meaning Communists.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, for Poland, Jaff Schatz distinguishes two ends of the spectrum: “Jewish Jews” or “persistent Jews” at one end and “assimilationists” at the other.<sup>48</sup> It is also often assumed that most of the Zionists, religious Jews, or “Jewish Jews” left for Israel or elsewhere, and consequently proponents of assimilation dominated Jewish society in postwar Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Few historians have challenged the view of a linear process of assimilation. In her description of postwar Polish Jewish society, Audrey Kichelewski prefers to use the distinction between organized Jews and “marranos,” drawing on terminology employed in the JDC reports, and she argues that the line between organized and “masked” (*cachés*<sup>49</sup>) Jews was fluid, and people could move easily in both directions.<sup>50</sup>

This is actually also clear from the JDC files. In 1961, Akiva Kohane, a JDC worker, explained that the summer-camp program in Poland would be larger that year than before, because “many parents who have previously lived as ‘marranos’ have decided that they want their children to be Jews and to meet other Jewish children.”<sup>51</sup> And in a report from 1964 we read:

The figure for emigration from Poland is about 1,000 yearly—roughly half to Israel and half to other countries. The loss of population due to emigration is compensated by “interior” migration—that is, from the “marranos” group to the group

<sup>47</sup> Petr Brod, “Židé v poválečném Československu,” in Václav Veber (ed.), *Židé v novodobých dějinách: Soubor přednášek na FF UK* (Prague, 1997), 153–154.

<sup>48</sup> Schatz, *The Generation*, 236–241.

<sup>49</sup> Audrey Kichelewski, “Juifs en Pologne communiste: Minorité, communauté, nationalité? Une tentative de (re)définition,” in Stéphanie Laithier, Vincent Vilmain (eds.), *L'histoire des minorités est-elle une histoire marginale?* (Paris, 2008), 97–106.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>51</sup> AJJDC, New York Collection 1955–1964, European Headquarters, Staff Meetings, 1961, American Joint Distribution Committee Department Heads Meeting, 8 June 1961, ref. code: NY AR195564/1/1/1209. Similarly, Helena Datner observes that the number of children in Jewish schools interestingly increased in periods of emigration in 1947/48 and again in 1955/56. See Helena Datner, “Dziecko żydowskie (1944–1968),” in Tych and Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów*, 262.

which identify themselves as Jews. This is the reason that the Jewish population of Poland has remained more or less constant during the last five years.<sup>52</sup>

We observe a similar growing interest in Judaism among some Czech dissidents in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. The example of these “New Jews” again shows the flexibility of Jewish identity for which the linear assimilationist narrative has no explanation.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the revival of Jewish culture and religious communities in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s also contradicts the assimilation narrative. The important and influential book *Virtually Jewish*, by Ruth Ellen Gruber,<sup>54</sup> fails, however, to point out the continuity of this complex, multilayered process. Gruber instead builds on the premise of the alleged assimilation of Jews or even their non-existence in the region, and she observes the revival with a mixture of appreciation and criticism. Her book is certainly a unique contribution to the discussions about the attempts of Jews and non-Jews to return Jewish culture and religion to the public space and media of east-central Europe. Still, one cannot overlook her colonialist approach, when, as an American Jew whose own Jewishness is somehow unquestionable, she questions the authenticity of the Jewishness of the people she is researching and their activities in the European Diaspora which had been hit so hard by Nazism and Communism.<sup>55</sup>

The dynamics of Jewish identity, which may be present in one’s personality in different ways depending on the time and place, is also a topic of

<sup>52</sup> AJDC, NY 55, New York Collection 1955–1964, Poland: General, 1962–1964, Confidential Notes for Mr. Katzki on Poland, 24 September 1964, ref. code: NY AR195564/4/47/1/654. I thank Misha Mitsel from the AJJDC archives for his help in searching for those documents.

<sup>53</sup> There has still been little research done on those individuals who became religious Jews partly in protest to the Communist regime in the 1970s. For Poland, see Konstanty Gebert, *Living in the Land of Ashes* (Kraków, 2008); Małgorzata Niezabitowska, *Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland* (New York, 1986); Stephan Stach, “Würden die Helden des Ghettos leben, sie würden sicher die Solidarność-Bewegung unterstützen...”: Über die Aneignung der Erinnerung an den Warschauer Ghettoaufstand in Polen,” in Jürgen Heyde et al. (eds.), *Dekonstruieren und doch erzählen: Polnische und andere Geschichten* (Göttingen, 2015), 109–118. For the interest in Jewish history and culture in the 1970s and 1980s, see also: Marcin Wodziński, “Jewish Studies in Poland,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 10 (2011), 1: 103–104.

<sup>54</sup> Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> For different approaches to the revival of interest in the Jewish legacy, culture, and religion, see Erica Lehrer, “Jewish Heritage, Pluralism, and Milieux de Mémoire: The Case of Kraków’s Kazimierz,” in Erica Lehrer, Michael Meng (eds.), *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland* (Bloomington, 2015), 170–192; Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland* (Cambridge–London, 2011).

Karen Auerbach's excellent analysis in *The House at Ujazdowskie 16* (2013). Her starting point is the residents of a building in Warsaw where employees of a state publishing house were offered accommodation. Many of the employees were Jewish, and Auerbach skillfully analyzes the many layers of Jewish experience mainly in postwar Communist Poland, but also follows their traces back to the first generation in prewar times, when most of them had decided to join the Communist party. Auerbach, whose research is based in part on archival documents but mostly on interviews and private correspondence, shows the ups and downs of these people's lives, when Jewish identity became more or less important for them. She shows the different kinds of Jewish self-perception, and considers the differences between the first and the second generation and the impact of the antisemitic campaigns of 1956 and 1968. Her pioneering work clearly shows the limits of the assimilationist narrative. People of the first generation did not "assimilate," did not conform to any majority. Auerbach sensitively demonstrates that by their decision to become involved in underground Communist activities in prewar Poland these Jews were instead choosing a way of life which was in opposition to both the Polish political and social establishment and their own Jewish religious background. Moreover, it is fair to argue, using Auerbach's findings, that those fighters for social justice and for secular Poland were in a marginal position after the war as well. Except for some of their like-minded non-Jewish friends with similar life stories, they could share their hopes and disappointments with hardly anyone. It is, then, all the more absurd that Auerbach, despite her results, continues to use assimilationist terminology and the linear assimilation model formulated by Milton Gordon in his *Assimilation in American Life* (1964).<sup>56</sup>

## Alternatives

In the field of Polish-Jewish historiography, Agnieszka Jagodzińska published a highly persuasive article showing the many limits of the assimilationist model. After reading her "seven main sins" of assimilation, one cannot but agree with her conclusion that the category of assimilation is no longer a useful tool for research analysis.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Auerbach, *The House at Ujazdowskie 16*, 10, 196.

<sup>57</sup> Agnieszka Jagodzińska, "Asymilacja, czyli bezradność historyka: O krytyce terminu i pojęcia," in Konrad Zieliński (ed.), *Wokół akulturacji i asymilacji Żydów na ziemiach polskich* (Lublin, 2010), 23.

At the end of her article, however, she seeks to give the term of a second chance, and points to the entry on assimilation in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, which is written by the prominent historian, Todd M. Endelman. The author points to the crucial distinction in the use of this term in the descriptive and prescriptive senses, and divides it into four “analytically distinct changes in Jewish behavior and status”:

acculturation (the acquisition of the cultural and social habits of the dominant non-Jewish group), integration (the entry of Jews into the non-Jewish social circles and spheres of activity), emancipation (the acquisition of rights and privileges enjoyed by non-Jewish citizens/subjects of similar socioeconomic rank), and secularization (the rejection of religious beliefs and the obligation and practices that flow from these beliefs).<sup>58</sup>

Endelman also urges that a distinction be made between “assimilation as a complex of processes and assimilation as a cultural and political program.” In his article, he decided to “trace the history of groups advocating and promoting assimilation” in Russia, Poland, the Bohemian Lands, and Hungary. Surprisingly, by describing and, especially, by interpreting the different ideological and religious movements he uses the term “assimilation” without any differentiation or limits. His description of the situation in the Bohemian Lands is particularly weak because it shows his automatic embracing of a nationalist interpretation. “In an ethnically divided society, with whom were Jews to identify?” asks Endelman in describing the situation of the Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century. His question reveals not only that he still believes in the dominance of clear-cut national groups in central Europe<sup>59</sup> but also that he does not question the one-dimensional assimilationist model. Moreover, he claims to trace the history of groups advocating assimilation. He describes the activities of the Or Tomid, the association of Bohemian Jews who wanted Czech to be used in religious services instead of German.

<sup>58</sup> Todd M. Endelman, “Assimilation,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Assimilation> [retrieved: 16 Mar. 2015].

<sup>59</sup> For the Bohemian Lands, this nationalist approach has been questioned especially in Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton, 2005); Robert Luft, “Nationale Utraquisten in Böhmen: Zur Problematik ‘nationaler Zwischenstellungen’ am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in Maurice Godé, Jacques Le Rider, Françoise Mayer (eds.), *Allemands, Juifs et Tchèques à Prague, 1890–1924* (Montpellier, 1996), 37–51; Wilma Iggers, “The Flexible National Identities of Bohemian Jewry,” *East Central Europe* 7 (1980), 1: 39–48; Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen; Čapková, Czechs, Germans, Jews?*

But in fact the officials of Or Tomid never advocated assimilation. And anyway, would using Czech instead of German for the sermons have made them more assimilated? Consequently, though he critically observes that the term ‘assimilation’ “continues to haunt the writing of Jewish history,” Endelman, in this encyclopedia entry, clearly fails to explain why the term should be avoided in academic writing in this field or be used only when analyzing the historical usage of the term ‘assimilation’ and its many (often contradictory) meanings.

Two theories that have been widely debated across the academic fields of history, sociology, and political science in the past forty years or so have fruitfully questioned the assimilationist approach to history and society. First, in connection with the growing number of immigrants to the countries of northern and western Europe and the United States since the 1960s, a broad range of politicians, academics, and civil-rights activists have opposed assimilatory policies that expected the migrants to discard their customs and even beliefs and adopt those of the majority society. In the scholarly literature, the one-dimensional assimilation concept that presupposes the need for the conformity of minorities with the normative dominant population has been persuasively criticized by American and French sociologists as well as specialists on social geography.<sup>60</sup> Rogers Brubaker has observed a “differentialist” turn in America and northern and western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result of this turn, the “pluralistic understanding of persisting diversity” and the turn toward multiculturalism became conventional wisdom.<sup>61</sup>

Criticism of the concept of multiculturalism has been mounting in the last decade, especially in the context of the radical Islamist terrorist attacks throughout the world, West and East, including the USA, Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Multiculturalism means many different things,<sup>62</sup> and the criticism of it is often only a smokescreen

<sup>60</sup> The first influential critique appeared in the 1960s, in Nathan Glazer, Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, 1963). For the 1980s, see James M. Blaut, *The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism* (London, 1987), and Henri Giordan, *Démocratie culturelle et droit à la différence* (Paris, 1982).

<sup>61</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “The Return of Assimilation? Changing Perspectives on Immigration and Its Sequels in France, Germany, and the United States,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24 (2001), 4: 531–532.

<sup>62</sup> Steven Vertovec, “Multi-multiculturalisms,” in Marco Martiniello (ed.), *Multicultural Policies and the State: A Comparison of Two European Societies* (Utrecht, 1998), 25–38.

for xenophobia.<sup>63</sup> Whatever criticism of multiculturalism we are now experiencing—and some of it, from scholars who would prefer to see an emphasis on individual rights,<sup>64</sup> is well founded, we should definitely avoid a return to the normative dominant nationalist narrative. We can, instead, choose from new approaches based on the concept of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan federalism,<sup>65</sup> which, as Moshe Rosman cogently argues, might be even more beneficial for conceptualizing the inclusion of the Jews in society.<sup>66</sup>

Second, the understanding of modern nationalism as a political construct has been well established in historiography since at least the 1990s,<sup>67</sup> and many scholars have applied this deconstruction of nationalist ideology and policy in different case studies. There is no inherent nationality into which we are born. People feel attached to different national, religious, social, occupational, or family based societies and communities differently in different contexts, at different times of their lives, and even in different daily situations. Our identity (including the national one) is changing, interactive, plural, and situational, and is an expression of our desire to belong somewhere and be part of larger social networks. Part of this everyday process of negotiation is social interaction with people of different ideas and persuasions, who also often have distorted pictures of the people of their networks, and one has to deal with this distorted picture as well.<sup>68</sup> Social networks and contexts in daily life, much more

<sup>63</sup> Chris Allen, “Islamophobia and the Crises of Europe’s Multiculturalism,” in Erkan Toğuşlu, Johan Leman, İsmail Mesut Sezgin (eds.), *New Multicultural Identities in Europe: Religion and Ethnicity in Secular Societies* (Leuven, 2014), 213–228.

<sup>64</sup> See Brian M. Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge, 2001); Christian Joppke, *Immigration and the Nation-State: The United States, Germany, and Great Britain* (Oxford, 1999); and Paul Joseph Kelly, *Multiculturalism Reconsidered: ‘Culture and Equality’ and Its Critics* (Cambridge–Malden, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge–New York, 2004); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York, 2006); Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge–Malden, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish Is Jewish History?* (Oxford–Portland, 2007), 130.

<sup>67</sup> See Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn. (London, 1991); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1990); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales: Europe XVIIIe–XXe siècle* (Paris, 1999); Jeremy King, “The Nationalization of East Central Europe: Ethnicism, Ethnicity, and Beyond,” in Maria Bucur, Nancy M. Wingfield (eds.), *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (West Lafayette, 2001), 112–152.

<sup>68</sup> I was inspired here especially by Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, 2nd edn. (London, 2008); id., *Social Identity*, 3rd edn. (Abingdon–New York, 2008).

than languages or political programs, are therefore of key importance for understanding the complex question of national identifications.<sup>69</sup> If we accept that we are all part of overlapping social networks, we are better able to understand the complexity of the life experience of every person. We will then also be able to take seriously the large number of Jews in Poland or the Bohemian Lands who managed to combine being religious, often pro-Zionist, with having Polish or Czech patriotic feelings, and being parents, fans of local soccer clubs, and so on. But to properly understand this complexity of a person's various loyalties and attachments, more research in the fields of social history and migration and more microstudies are needed.

If we accept this complexity of our existence and also the pluralistic character of our societies, the one-dimensional assimilation concept, presupposing the need for the conformity of minorities with the normative dominant population, which occurs in a good deal of the recent historiography on the Jews of central and eastern Europe after the war, appears outdated, even absurd.

Maud Mandel also suggests that we go beyond the assimilationist concept and focus instead on cultural exchange. She persuasively argues that “the majority cultures to which Jews are assimilating are themselves ever-changing, dynamic, and heterogeneous forms that both shape the parameters of minority inclusion *and* change as a result of that inclusion.”<sup>70</sup> She mentions the likelihood of criticism of historians who place excessive emphasis on the active and allegedly key role of Jews in shaping history—as was clear, for example, from some of the reviews of Yuri Slezkine’s *The Jewish Century*.<sup>71</sup> Nor should emphasizing the active role of Jews in the history of European societies lead us back to the “contribution discourses,” which, as Rosman convincingly claims, are “a form of ethnocentric expressive hostility. By proving how valuable minority members—in this case Jews—were to society, indeed to civilization as a whole, the apologists were trying to convince their non-Jewish interlocutors of the indispensable role that Jews play in society.”<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> This is the main thesis of my book on the national identities of the Jews of Bohemia, see Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews?*

<sup>70</sup> Maud Mandel, “Assimilation and Cultural Exchange in Modern Jewish History,” in Jeremy Cohen, Moshe Rosman (eds.), *Rethinking European Jewish History* (Oxford–Portland, 2009), 85.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 86–87.

<sup>72</sup> Rosman, *How Jewish Is Jewish History?*, 116–117.

Through the lens of a pluralistic understanding of society we should be able to see clearly the history of societies as joint projects in which Jews and non-Jews, often together, sometimes apart, often along totally different lines from those of nationality and religion, were shaping the political, cultural, and economic reality of their societies. Mandel gives Lisa Moses Leff's *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity* as an example of a fruitful analysis of shared history.<sup>73</sup> We could add many more examples from central Europe.<sup>74</sup> All of those examples, however, are from a period before the Shoah. For the postwar Polish context one may only include Marci Shore's *Caviar and Ashes* (2006) on the Polish avant-garde.

By accepting new approaches to nationalism studies, the picture becomes even more complex, since we, especially in the twentieth century, can often barely distinguish between Jews and non-Jews. Not only because of the overlapping national identities, but also because of the Shoah, which made many people who no longer identified with Judaism aware of their Jewish ancestors. It is therefore all the more paradoxical that the focus on the assimilationist narrative in the historiography on the postwar Jewish experience in central and eastern Europe marginalizes those Jews for whom Judaism was a crucial part of their personal identity.

## Conclusion

Though more than a quarter of century has passed since the collapse of the Communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, the historiography on postwar Jewish history—especially that written in those particular countries—is still suffering from the dominance of the nationalist narrative and unquestioned remnants of the argumentation from the Communist period. In both countries—Poland and the Czech Republic (and the former Czechoslovakia)—religious Jews have not merely been neglected: if mentioned at all, they are often described as people tied to the past and the ghetto, as opponents of modernity. The nationalist perspective also ignores the great plurality of the Jewish community after the Shoah,

<sup>73</sup> Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> See Klaus Hödl, "Zum Wandel des Selbstverständnisses zentraleuropäischer Juden durch Kulturtransfer," in Wolfgang Schmale, Martina Steer (eds.), *Kulturtransfer in der jüdischen Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main–New York, 2006), 57–82; Niedhammer, *Nur eine "Geld-Emancipation"?*; Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen*.

a plurality that persisted even though the vast majority of the Jews in this region had been murdered.

The allegedly dominant assimilationist character of the Jewish communities in both countries neglects a considerable part of the Jewish population in the border regions, for whom religion often played an important role and who also had a more complex cultural and linguistic repertoire than most of their brethren in Prague and Warsaw. Historical research on the Jews of central and eastern Europe after the Second World War would profit immensely from a geographic/spatial shift in perspective from the center to the periphery.

It would equally profit from the acknowledgment of the importance of migration, from interpretations free of prejudice towards any group of people who have identified with Judaism, and from a pluralistic view of society. Pluralism became the conventional wisdom (though recently threatened) in Canada and the United States and also in northern and western Europe several decades ago, but it is still struggling for acceptance in central and eastern Europe.

Historiography liberated from nationalist patterns of interpretation will most certainly offer more varied pictures of Jewish societies and Jewish experiences in central and eastern Europe. These pictures will also be much easier to incorporate into the history of the region because they will reveal many shared ideas and relationships with the diverse inhabitants of those territories.

*Katerina Čapková*  
Institute for Contemporary History  
Czech Academy of Sciences  
[capkova@usd.cas.cz](mailto:capkova@usd.cas.cz)