This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, which are retained by the thesis author, unless otherwise stated.
A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge.
This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author.
The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author.
When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.
Being and Becoming Jewish:  
Kinship, Memory, and the Politics of Jewishness in  
Post-Socialist Slovakia  

Katarina Ockova  

PhD Social Anthropology  
The University of Edinburgh  
2019
I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a degree or professional qualification. Apart from where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Katarina Ockova

Edinburgh, 30 September 2019
Abstract

This thesis, based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, examines the entanglement of kinship, religion and politics among Jews in Bratislava. It uses marriage as a lens to explore how young Jews identify with their often newly-discovered Jewishness and secure its socio-cultural reproduction into the future. Studying the lived experience of three generations of Slovak Jews – Holocaust survivors, their children, and grandchildren – I describe the intergenerational transmission of knowledge about Jewishness and Jewish heritage, marital preferences and practices, and choices and decisions involved in the upbringing of children in the context of changing political regimes. I focus in particular on the generation of Jews who reached adulthood after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, and explore how their families’ memories and experiences of the Holocaust and Socialist persecution, as well as the current socio-political situation and rising extremism influence the ways young Jews navigate their Jewishness – both within the Jewish community, and in the unpredictable non-Jewish public sphere. To demonstrate their allegiance to this community while keeping it hidden from non-Jews, I argue, young Jews stretch and shrink the boundary between the ‘public’ and ‘private’, complicating the distinction between these categories, and allowing the emergence of new ‘publics’ and ‘privates’. The chronic uncertainty affecting Slovak Jews’ everyday lives exacerbates the fragility of trust, and underpins a constant need to negotiate their Jewishness across this elastic boundary, as well as within their intimate relations. The thesis sheds light on the role of social distinctions and processes of boundary-making and maintenance that characterise the politics of Jewishness in post-Socialist Slovakia. It shows how, for young Jews, discovering their Jewishness, demonstrating their devotion, and gaining recognition, is more a matter of becoming than of simply being Jewish.
Lay summary

This thesis explores how the experience of three different political regimes – the fascist Slovak State, the Socialist Czechoslovakia, and the democratic Slovak Republic – as well as the ruptures marked by the Holocaust and the Velvet Revolution in 1989, have affected the family lives of three generations of Slovak Jews. It examines how they perceive their Jewishness in the light of the troubled past, their present sense of insecurity, and their imaginations of the future. Focusing mainly on the generation of Jews who reached their adulthood after the political change in 1989, I explore how their families’ memories and experiences influence the ways they navigate their Jewishness in their everyday lives within but also outside of the Jewish community, and their own decisions when choosing their life partners and raising children.

This thesis demonstrates that for many young Jews, learning about their Jewishness came as a surprise only later in their lives. Uncovering this family secret, due to its kinship as well as political character, however, had a powerful effect and changed not only how these young people saw themselves, but also how they started to relate to others. Trying to learn more about what it means to be Jewish, many approached the Jewish religious congregation. While the community offered a ‘safe space’ to express one’s Jewishness without fearing potential antisemitism, young Jews realised its ambivalent character and the role of knowledge in social acceptance. Suddenly, they faced a need to negotiate new group boundaries and distinctions set by their descent, as well as the knowledge of their familial background and their older kin’s choices judged in terms of loyalty or the lack thereof.

This thesis sheds light on the entanglement of kinship, religion and politics. It shows that a sense of uncertainty and issues of mistrust permeate the everyday lives of Slovak Jews, as the risk of betrayal may come not only from non-Jews but also from within the Jewish community. The felt necessity for carefulness highlights the fragility of trust that affects relationships on all levels. It contributes to young Jews’ endogamous marital preferences based on a sense of sameness and understanding.
and asks for renegotiation of their fears when marrying outside of the community. The chronic sense of insecurity, transmitted through generations, motivates these young people to employ various strategies of ‘careful concealment’ and practices of compartmentalisation to hide their otherness. They experience an inner struggle: on the one hand they want to be proud and express their Jewishness, but on the other hand they feel they need to keep it secret. To navigate these emotions as well as to negotiate various statuses ascribed to them within the community, I argue, young Jews stretch and shrink the boundary between ‘private’ and ‘public’. By separating the ‘Jewish public’ from the non-Jewish public, they create two distinct audiences with different knowledge, which enables them to communicate different messages. This thesis argues that through maintaining the elasticity of this boundary and separation of these audiences within such politicised context, young Slovak Jews find ways to demonstrate their devotion to Jewishness – and essentially their trustworthiness – to gain desired recognition and acceptance within the Jewish community, while at the same time preserving their sense of security by keeping their Jewishness invisible in the non-Jewish outside.
For my parents

In memoriam
For my loving grandmother
Table of Contents

List of Figures ........................................................................................................... 15
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. 17
Glossary ..................................................................................................................... 21
List of Abbreviations ............................................................................................... 27

Introduction ............................................................................................................. 29
  The Jewish minority in Slovakia ................................................................. 33
  Jews in Slovakia before the Second World War ............................ 33
  The Shoah ............................................................................................................ 35
  The situation after 1945 .................................................................................. 37
  Jewish life and politics after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 .... 41
Exploring the themes ........................................................................................... 43
  Jewishness, being Jewish and being a Jew: What makes a person Jewish? .................................................. 43
  Belonging, insecurity and boundaries ....................................................... 46
  Marriage and issues of continuity .............................................................. 48
  Memory, politics and kinship ....................................................................... 52
  Knowledge, secrecy, recognition and (mis)trust ......................................... 57
  Methods ............................................................................................................ 63
  Chapter summaries .......................................................................................... 74

Chapter One
Uncovering the Family Secret: Young Jews Learning About Their Jewishness ......................................................................................................................... 79
  The moment of discovery .............................................................................. 81
  Learning to navigate the knowledge of Jewishness .................................... 87
  Bringing up a new generation ....................................................................... 91
  Transmission through concealment: Raising a certain type of person .......... 91
### Chapter Two

**Jewishness: Perceived, Practiced and Imagined**  
111

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The generation gap at home and the desire to explore Jewishness</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The SUJY and the politics of Jewishness</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is Jewish? Drawing community boundaries</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Fitting in’: What makes a person ‘Jewish enough’?</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘We do this to feel Jewish’: Performance and personhood at home</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material culture, language learning, and ‘Jewish literature’</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective performance</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘You are what you eat’</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter Three

**Negotiating Private and Public Jewishness**  
143

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with uncertainty and insecurity</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The politics of visibility: The boundary of the ‘safe space’</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The doorpost of the house: A <em>mezuzah</em></td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The window of the house: A Christmas tree</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The body and Jewishness</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing the knowledge?</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial transmission of fear</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guarding the knowledge: Issues of trust and notions of insecurity</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Four

Choosing a Life Partner .................................. 177

Desiring sameness: Redefining endogamy ......................... 181
  Rebeka ...................................................... 181
  Samuel ..................................................... 182
  Alena ......................................................... 184

Imagining the ideal: Other preferences ............................ 187

Romantic love and attraction ...................................... 189

The ‘sibling issue’ ............................................ 189

Desiring romantic love .......................................... 191

The matter of ‘how’: Searching for a Jewish partner .......... 194

Marrying out: The issues of trust and notions of insecurity .... 199

Making it work: Choosing a good non-Jewish partner ......... 203

Conclusion ....................................................... 209

Chapter Five

What Makes a Wedding Jewish? .................................. 213

The wedding ritual: Temporality and authenticity ............... 216

‘Donned’ limitations ........................................... 221

No (major) alterations desired .................................... 225

The ‘Jewish public’ ............................................. 227

In search of a safer space ....................................... 228

A move towards the ‘public’: Seeking recognition .......... 230

In need of a more ‘neutral’ document ............................ 233

Demonstration matters: Creating distinctions ................... 235

When demonstration still matters ................................ 240

Conclusion ....................................................... 243
Chapter Six

‘Making Them Jewish’: Bringing up the Next Generation .......... 247

Naming: Creating (and hardening) links ........................................ 250

Names that bear meaning: Getting closer to one’s heritage ...... 251

Issues of visibility ................................................................. 254

‘Veiled names’: Names travelling in time ............................... 256

Circumcision: Making Jewish bodies ........................................ 258

The social role of bris .............................................................. 259

The uncircumcised body: Delegating choice .............................. 264

‘Raising them as Jewish’: Education and providing ‘Jewish knowledge’... 268

Confusion and Jewishness at home ........................................ 274

Striving towards a ‘more positive Jewishness’ .......................... 277

Conclusion .................................................................................. 280

Conclusion .................................................................................. 283

Bibliography .............................................................................. 293
# List of Figures

## Maps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bratislava and its districts</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bratislava – city centre</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Photographs (and images)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mitzvah day – cleaning the Jewish Orthodox cemetery</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>the big <em>hanukiah</em> on Rybné Square</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Birth certificate from 1948</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>synagogue on Heydukova Street</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>inside of the synagogue on Heydukova Street</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Alena’s <em>mezuzah</em> on a doorframe</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Alena’s <em>chai</em> pendant</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Oliver’s ring</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>the <em>chuppah</em> of the JRC in Bratislava</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>a place for a <em>chuppah</em> in the garden behind the synagogue on Heydukova Street</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

With all my heart, I would like to thank the people who came into my life during my fieldwork within the Jewish community in Bratislava. Without them none of this would have been possible. I am infinitely grateful to them for welcoming me into their lives and sharing with me their stories, memories and experiences. My perspective has been unimaginably enriched by the openness and kindness of people I have met during my fieldwork. I would like to thank everyone who shared their time with me and made me feel welcome. To preserve the anonymity of my informants, I will not thank them by their names individually – but I would like them to know that I am grateful to everyone I have met in the pensioner’s and the Holocaust survivors’ club, at Ohel David, at the Torah reading classes, in the Slovak Union of Jewish Youth, and at various other groups and events within the Jewish community centre and also outside of it. To name only one person, whom I call in the thesis ‘Milena’, I would like to thank her from the bottom of my heart for inviting me in, letting me meet wonderful people, becoming my friend and over the years since my fieldwork taking on a role of a caring ‘spiritual grandmother’. I am also very grateful to my new friends from the Slovak Union of Jewish Youth. They turned my initially lonely time in Bratislava into a most enjoyable and memorable one. I would like to thank everyone who took me in and never made me feel like the outsider that I was. I am thankful for their friendships, which have endured beyond the timelines of my fieldwork, across state borders, and through life changes.

I would also like to thank the people who helped me at the very beginning of my fieldwork. I am grateful to Lucia for introducing me to people when getting access seemed the hardest and for becoming a friend. I am very thankful to Dr. Ivica Bumová for all her help and making me feel welcome at the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Comenius University in Bratislava, where I was affiliated during my fieldwork. I will be always indebted to her for introducing me to the Anthropology of Judaism and Jewish culture during my undergraduate studies and for inspiring my curiosity. I would like to also thank Dr. Peter Salner for his help and encouragement from the very beginning, for giving me courage to take part in community activities,
his words of wisdom, highlighting the importance of my research, and sharing his knowledge. And I would also like to express my thankfulness to Rabbi Myers for opening the door to the Torah reading classes, as well as to his home, to me, and for teaching me many lessons about religion and faith, and that one cannot solve a problem that does not exist.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the funding I have received towards my doctoral studies and fieldwork itself. It would not have been possible without the financial support of the Graduate School of Social and Political Science PhD Award Scholarship from the University of Edinburgh that enabled me to pursue my studies. My research and this thesis also benefited from the support of the Sir Richard Stapley Educational Trust Grant and the research grant from the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe. I am very thankful for their financial help.

This thesis would not have been the same without the help and caring support from my two supervisors, Professor Janet Carsten and Dr. Hannah Holtschneider. I am extremely grateful for their steadfast support and encouragement through all stages of my doctoral studies. My principal supervisor, Professor Janet Carsten, has been a great inspiration to me and I will be always grateful for her nurturing support, providing me with a sense of being looked after and cared for throughout my studies. She has always found time to hear my ideas and given me space to figure out what I wanted to say. I am deeply intellectually and personally indebted to her for teaching me to question the obvious, to not expect anything, and to be prepared for unexpected. Dr. Hannah Holtschneider, my secondary supervisor, has been a very kind and encouraging mentor. Bringing her expertise in Jewish studies and Jewish/non-Jewish relations, she has been a great source of guidance. I am deeply grateful to both my supervisors for their patience and empathy, helping me on this journey, and for being very generous with their feedback as well as their time, care and support.

During my time in Edinburgh, I have been very fortunate to have found many very good and caring friends. I am grateful for our time spent together – celebrating joyous moments and also supporting each other at times of worry – and for the friendships that endured the test of time and distance. I would like to especially thank Koreen Reece for being a dear friend who was always up for a walk or a cup of tea,
and conversing about life and its beauties and perplexities. She has put a roof above my head when it was needed and with a huge smile offered her carefully gathered wisdoms. I am also indebted to her for her patience and enormous help with proofreading this thesis, and teaching me to simplify my thoughts. I am also thankful to Resto Cruz, my friend and anthropological brother, for all the fascinating conversations, all the heart-warming meals and upside-down cakes, as well as the laughter, big brother’s shoulder, and loving hugs. Monica Skaten has been a cheerful friend and confidant ever since she joined my office. Always happy to go for a walk, she took care of me more than she realises. Liz Ravalde, with her tranquil presence and sharp wit, has been a helpful and supportive friend, bringing a sense of calm to my life. Brianne Wenning, has made all lunches more enjoyable. Stephen McConnachie has been a dear and supportive friend who cooked for me a warm soup when it was most needed. Gilda Neri has been a dear friend who brings smiles and warm hugs wherever she goes. And Pablo Briceno and Javiera Sepulveda have cared about how my day has been ever since we met, even when being almost 13,000 kilometres apart.

I am also grateful to my many colleagues and friends at the University of Edinburgh who were walking the same path of doctoral studies and with whom we shared many life-changing moments: Evangelos Chrysagis, Tom Cunningham, Don Duprez, Andreas Hackl, Heid Jerstad, Lilian Kennedy, Hannah Lesshafft, Lucy Lowe, Siobhan Magee, Diego Malara, Hanna Mantila, Iris Marchand, Orla Murray, Elliott Oakley, Mart Viirand, Sarah Walker, and Inna Yaneva-Toraman. Many of them read the drafts of my chapters during the Writing-up seminar and offered very insightful and helpful comments. I am also thankful to the members of staff at the Department of Social Anthropology who shared their thoughts on my project and offered suggestions. To mention just a few, I would like to specially thank Dr. Magnus Course, Professor Alexander Robertson, Dr. Jacob Copeman, Professor Tobias Kelly, Dr. Lotte Hoek, and Dr. Dimitri Tsintjilonis.

I would like to also express my gratefulness to my friends beyond the academia – in Edinburgh but also in other European cities – for their enduring and loving support, and stable presence in my life despite the geographical distance between us. Especially, I want to thank Ľubomíra, Ľubica, Andrea, Radko, Jitka,
Miriam, Alica, Jonathan, Lizzy, Zuzana, Roman and Marek. I would like to also thank Tom and Sonsoles for being encouraging flatmates and caring friends, who were always keen on watching a movie or two.

Finally, I would like to express my wholehearted gratitude to my three parents – Elena, Ján and Miroslav – without whom none of this would be possible. I will be always grateful for their love and infinite support, and for creating a space for me where I felt that everything was possible. They believed in me, supported my journeys, and stood by my side at various life experiences. I will be always deeply grateful for them. I am also thankful to my sister Martina for brightening even the darker moments. I am especially grateful to my late maternal grandmother, Elena, for teaching me that love has no limits. I miss her greatly.
Glossary

Aliyah – ascent (Hebrew); immigration to Israel
Ashkenazi – Jews descended from Central and Eastern Europe (originally the former Rhineland)
Bar mitzvah – son of the commandment (Hebrew); a term used to refer to a stage of life when a boy becomes a bar mitzvah at the age of 13, and also to refer to the ceremony celebrating this transition (a similar celebration for girls is called bat mitzvah)
Barches – is a twisted bread baked for special occasions, including Shabbat dinner (also called challah)
Bashert – destiny (Yiddish); a term used to refer to one’s soulmate
Bedeken – covering (Yiddish); ceremonial veiling of the bride by the groom during the wedding ritual
Bris – circumcision (Yiddish)
Brit milah – circumcision (Hebrew)
Celý – a state of being whole or complete (Slovak)
Chabad-Lubavitch – a Hasidic movement within Judaism
Chai – Hebrew for ‘life’
Challah – see barches
Chanukiáda – a community event celebrating the Hanukah
Cheder – a school for Jewish children where Jewish traditions, religious laws, and Hebrew are taught
Chochmes – wisdom (alternative spellings are chochmah or chokhmah)
Chuppah – a wedding canopy or baldachin
Dôverovat’ – to trust (Slovak)
Generácia – generation (Slovak)
Guráž – courage (Slovak)
Halakhah – Jewish religious law
Halakhic – term used to describe if someone was Jewish according to the Halakhah
Hamsa – the hand of Fatima, also known as hamesh
Hanukah – Festival of lights (alternative spellings are Hanukkah or Chanukah), celebrated in December
Hanukiah – a special candelabra for Hanukah with nine candle holders: eight for candles gradually lit each night, and one for a shamash (helper) candle used to light them
Identita – identity (Slovak)
Kabbalah – the mystical school of thought in Judaism
Kashrüt – a set of dietary laws in Judaism
Ketubah – a Jewish marriage contract
Ketubot – plural of ketubah
Kiddush – a blessing recited over wine, performed for example on Shabbat or during a Jewish wedding ritual
Kiddushin – a ritual of dedication, also known as erusin (Hebrew for ‘betrothal’), it is the first part of a Jewish wedding process (the second part is nissuin [nuptials])
Kippah – head covering for men, skullcap
Kippot – plural of kippah
Kittel – a knee-long white robe worn by Orthodox men on special occasions such as their weddings, on Yom Kippur, or at their funeral
Komunita – a community (Slovak)
Košerovanie – making something kosher or ‘koshering’ (Slovak)
Kosher – a term for food that is suitable to be eaten according to the laws of kashrüt
Kostol – a church (Slovak)
Krav maga – a self-defence martial art
Lager – concentration camp
Maces – unleavened bread (alternative spellings: matzo or matzah)
Mazal Tov – good luck (Hebrew); also used to convey congratulations
Menorah – candelabrum with seven candle holders
Menorot – plural of menorah
Mezuzah – doorpost (Hebrew); a small object consisting of a casing with an inscribed parchment with text from Deuteronomy
Micvot – plural of mitzvah
Midrasha – Jewish school for women
Mikuláš – Saint Nicholas (Slovak)
Mikvah – a ritual bath
Minyan – a quorum of ten Jewish men necessary to be present for a communal prayer to be said out loud
Mischling – a person of ‘mixed-blood’
Mishnah – written account of Jewish oral traditions
Mitzvah – a commandment (Hebrew)
Mohel – a professionally trained circumciser
Obriezka – circumcision (Slovak)
Omama – grandmother; a term used by people coming from the South-Western region of Slovakia
Opapa – grandfather; a term used by people coming from the South-Western region of Slovakia
Pamätnie – remembering (Slovak)
Parsha – a weekly Torah reading
Payot – sidelocks or sidecurls, worn by some observant Orthodox Jewish men as a distinguishing sign of their observance, but also of their affiliation with particular movement within Judaism (alternative spelling is payos)
Pesach – also known as Passover; Jewish holiday celebrating commemoration of Jews’ liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt, celebrated in March/April
Polovičný – half (Slovak)
Purim – a joyful holiday commemorating the saving of Persian Jews from annihilation, celebrated in February/March
Rosh Hashanah – head of the year (Hebrew); the Jewish New Year, celebrated in September/October
Sanhedrin – assembly of judges
Seder – Jewish ritual feast marking the beginning of Pesach
Sephardim – Jews descended from communities originating in Iberian Peninsula
Shabbat – Hebrew for ‘rest’; also known as Sabbath or Shabbos (Yiddish) – seventh day of week (Saturday), a day of rest in Judaism
Shabbaton – a bi-monthly Shabbat dining event organised by the Slovak Union of Jewish Youth

Shadchan – matchmaker (Hebrew)

Shavuot – Festival of Weeks, celebrated in May/June

Shema Yisrael – ‘Hear o Israel’, a prayer recited during the morning and evening prayer services

Sheva Brachot – the Seven Blessings recited during a marriage ceremony

Shidduch – a system of matchmaking

Shoah – Hebrew term for the Holocaust – meaning ‘catastrophe’

Shochet – a person specially trained in slaughtering of animals so that the meat would fulfil the laws of kashrut

Shul – Yiddish term for a synagogue

Sochnut – short for Hasochnut Ayeudit or Jewish Agency for Israel

State Security – was a Secret Police formed from undercover agents

Taglit – Hebrew term for ‘discovery’, a colloquial name for a ten day trip organised by Taglit-Birthright Israel organisation for young Jewish people to discover Israel

Tallit – prayer shawl

The Law of Return – Israeli legislation passed in 1950 which secures the right to live in Israel and gain citizenship for Jews who have at least one Jewish grandparent

Tohorat Ha’mishpahah – family purity (Hebrew); the rules of family purity for married life

Torah – Pentateuch

Tzitzit – knotted ritual tassels worn by observant men (usually attached to a tallit)

Tzniut – modesty (Hebrew); the rules of modesty in Judaism

Verit’ – to trust (Slovak)

Vlastiveda – Homeland Studies (Slovak)

Yichud – seclusion (Hebrew), part of the wedding ritual when bride and groom spend a few minutes alone together

Yom Ha’atzmaut – the Independence Day of the State of Israel, celebrated in May
Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, celebrated in the autumn, 10 days after Rosh Hashanah

Žid – a Jew (Slovak)

Židovka – a feminine term for a Jew (Slovak)
List of abbreviations

CSUJY – Czechoslovak Union of Jewish Youth
CUJRC – Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic
CUJY – Czech Union of Jewish Youth
JCC – Jewish Community Centre
JRC – Jewish Religious Congregation
ĽSNS – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (People’s Party Our Slovakia)
ŠtB – Štátna bezpečnosť (State Security)
SUJY – Slovak Union of Jewish Youth
Introduction

It was a cold and windy morning in early January 2014. I was standing on a train platform in Vrútky, after having spent a few days at home with my family in North-Central Slovakia. Gazing at the mountains covered in snow, I knew I had the last week of my fieldwork ahead of me. There were still a couple of interviews to be conducted, and many friends I met during my research to see and bid goodbye.

My thoughts were interrupted by the approaching train to Bratislava. I boarded, and sat down in an almost empty compartment, next to a young woman reading a magazine. I decided to finish reading a book I had borrowed from Klara, my Jewish friend, to pass the four hour journey. It was an autobiographical account written by Reva Mann, called *The Rabbi’s Daughter*. With the train passing through snowy forests and past the ruins of once-majestic castles, I immersed myself in the plot.

A few stops later, two middle-aged men joined our compartment. They sat down opposite me, and continued a conversation about a Christian saint. Distracted by the new company, I noticed I was trying to hold my book at an angle that would make it harder for the men to read the cover, which had a large Star of David at its centre. Though not Jewish myself, after fourteen months of watching young Jews veil their Jewishness from the sight of non-Jewish others, I learned one should not stand out. I worried whether the book would trigger an antisemitic reaction, which I had encountered elsewhere several times.

After my phone rang and I put the book down, one of the men asked me what I was reading and I showed him the cover. He immediately changed his posture and his facial expression shifted from a polite smile into an unsettled, troubled and yet mocking grimace. “But you are not Jewish, are you?” he asked directly. It was a familiar question, one I had been asked countless times over the past fourteen months. When I replied I was not, he seemed relieved, and yet flustered. Sitting up
and leaning towards me, invading the limited personal space that small compartment afforded, he raised his voice and questioned what made me read “such stuff” – ideas which he and his travelling companion, who was looking very agitated as well, both considered “dangerous and potentially mind-altering.” One might describe what followed as a lecture full of conspiracy theories, passionately argued but ineffective. At this point, I noticed that the young woman next to me also felt uneasy, but did not take her eyes off of her magazine, avoiding the men’s attention.

As I tried to return to my book, to bring an end to this uncomfortable encounter, the man decided to try a new approach. He reached into his bag, took out a small book and started to read some passages from the New Testament out loud, making sure I was paying attention. This lasted several minutes, as the train headed from Trnava to Bratislava Main station, and I was left wondering what effect the man wished to have. Having met these people at the end of my fieldwork closed the circle of my research in home country – which had started with several antisemitic incidents on public transport vehicles in Bratislava in November 2012.

~

This thesis explores how the experience of three different political regimes, over the two ruptures marked by the Shoah (the Holocaust) and the Velvet Revolution in 1989, have affected the family lives of three generations of Slovak Jews. It examines how they understand their Jewishness and pursue its socio-cultural reproduction – in the light of the violent persecutions of the past, their present sense of insecurity, and their hopes and concerns about the future. It explores how their families’ memories and experiences influence their choices and decisions regarding their everyday lives, choosing life partners, and bringing up children. Throughout the following chapters, I show that kinship, religion and politics are intertwined; and that the chronic uncertainty with which Slovak Jews live exacerbates the fragility of trust, and underpins a constant need to negotiate their Jewishness across the elastic boundary between the private and the public, as well as within their intimate relations.

During my fieldwork, the everyday life of Bratislava’s Jewish community was unsettled by several political events, including the Prime Minister’s speech
declaring that “Slovakia was not established for minorities” (discussed in Chapter Three). Perhaps the most sobering moment, in which their fears were rendered tangible, came with the country’s regional elections, and the victory of a man who had made a habit of wearing the uniform of Hlinka Guard and, ‘heiling’ his followers, of denying the Holocaust.† In November 2013, Marián Kotleba, a high school teacher, became the governor of the district of Banská Bystrica – a region which had had a celebrated anti-fascist legacy as the epicentre of the Slovak National Uprising of 1944. Many months later, the parliamentary elections of March 2016 rendered the Jewish community speechless again, as Kotleba’s far-right political party – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS; People’s Party Our Slovakia) – gained eight percent of votes, and won ten percent of seats in the Slovak parliament.

Within a month of those elections, in April 2016, I watched news reports on Kotleba’s formation of (potentially armed) ‘guards’ from among his ĽSNS party members, tasked with maintaining ‘security’ on selected Slovak trains. Without any approval from the police or authorities, men in dark green sweatshirts with the ĽSNS logo took it upon themselves to “protect” passengers from “potentially misbehaving Roma”. As I reflected with foreboding on my own train encounter, one of my Jewish friends pointed out the associations with Hlinka Guard in the wartime Slovak State – which went beyond the visible similarity of their emblems.

The rapidly-changing political environment of Europe, and rising extremism, underscore the need for research in the under-examined and yet historically significant area of East-Central Europe. The close ethnographic study of a Jewish community that has been subject to three vastly different political regimes – the fascist Slovak State, the Socialist Czechoslovakia, and the democratic Slovak Republic – as well as the catastrophe of the Holocaust, provides a rich perspective on contemporary socio-political trends in the region. In the following chapters, I explore the entanglement of kinship, religion, memory and politics; the creation and maintenance of group boundaries on the part of a minority community; the productivity of secrecy and the importance of knowledge, which represents one means of creating those boundaries; the intergenerational transmission of (mis)trust

† The Hlinka Guard was a militia created during the wartime Slovak State, and supported by the Hlinka Slovak People’s Party, to “safeguard and promote the national life of the Slovak people and to fight the enemies of Slovak national, social, political, and religious life” (Jelinek 1971: 97).
and uncertainty, and of strategies to cope; the production of multiple public/private divides, and negotiations of Jewishness across them; and the politics of Jewishness in a changing socio-political context.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘politics’ to describe both institutional politics on regional and (trans)national levels, as well as the everyday politics of family and community life. By this term I mean the lived experience of production and reproduction of power, legitimation and hierarchy; therefore everything from party politics on a national stage to the politics of recognition in the Jewish community and of secrecy in the family. Following Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell (2013), I show how politics, kinship, and religion are deeply intertwined. In the chapters that follow, I argue that knowing about one’s Jewish descent is a form not only of a kinship and religious knowledge, but also political knowledge (see Chapter One) – because of the power it has over self-perception, over one’s sense of belonging and one’s allegiances, and also over the outer ascription of otherness. The entanglement of kinship, religion and politics is also evident in the ways that family history, descent, and the choices of one’s older kin after the Shoah and under Socialism affect one’s status within the Jewish community (see Chapter Two). I use the unique context of Jewish minority in post-Socialist Slovakia to demonstrate the multiple layers of interaction between kinship, politics and religion across time – from the state’s attempts to legislate the status of Jews and the power of state documents to (de)legitimate relatedness, to the ways personal and intimate choices affect recognition of belonging and allegiance within the community.

In the next sections, I explore the historical and political context of the present-day Slovak Republic, and situate the themes of this thesis in both the anthropological literature and inter-disciplinary discussions of Jewish studies. I then turn to a reflexive description of the methods used and my positioning within the field, and conclude with an overview of the chapters that follow.
The Jewish minority in Slovakia

Jews in Slovakia before the Second World War

Slovakia, in its present politico-geographic form, has not always been an autonomous entity. Over the course of past several centuries, it was a part of two multinational and multilingual political formations: the Kingdom of Hungary (until 1918), which itself was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and the Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939, and again from 1945-1992). Slovakia has been an autonomous state only twice – as the wartime Slovak State (1939-1945), and as the present democratic Slovak Republic, established in 1993. The socio-political position of the Jewish minority in this region, of course, has been sharply affected by wider political processes and influences affecting relations across these changing borders.\(^2\) Below, I describe Slovakia’s historical and political context in so far as it is relevant to my project.

Until the end of the 18\(^{th}\) century, Jews were regarded as “the lowest social and legal class” in the Kingdom of Hungary (Bárkány and Dojč 1991: 7). Their legal status was only ameliorated in 1782 by the Edict of Tolerance, which abolished some social and economic restrictions, and mandated access to secular education for Jews. In 1840, the Hungarian government allowed Jews to reside in towns – with the exception of mining centres – and removed some occupational limitations; and in 1895, all Jews were granted total civil and religious freedom (Salner 2002: 29; Salner 2000: 54; Jelinek 2009: 42-55).

These laws noticeably affected the social status of Jews, and subsequently both eased and accelerated their acculturation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this tendency caused serious conflicts within the Jewish minority. Successively, new Jewish religious movements emerged; and during the Congress of

Hungarian Jews in Budapest in 1868, the Jewish community split into ‘traditional’, strictly observing Orthodox Jews, and more open Neolog (also called ‘Congress’) Jews. Later, a new ‘Status quo ante’ community emerged which did not want to be part of either the stricter orthodox or the liberal communities (Salner 2002: 29-32; Jelinek 2009; Franek 1993; Rothkirchen 1971).

Periods of toleration among the Slovak majority for the Jewish minority alternated with violent intolerance (Salner 2000: 207; Klein-Pejšová 2009, 2012). With the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, the first Czechoslovak Republic was established, sparking a period of violence against Jews who were accused of ‘Magyarization’ (Salner 2000: 67-71; Salner 2002: 34; Jelinek 2009; Kieval 2010). The newly established Republic followed the official state borders set by the Treaty of Trianon (1920), affecting political relations between the Slovaks and Hungarians (see Klein-Pejšová 2012). Language use, in this nation-building context, was “politically charged as an indicator of loyalty to the bound territorial nation” (Klein-Pejšová 2009: 361). The situation, however, improved, and Czechoslovakia proved to be the “most hospitable environment for the Jews of its interwar east central European neighbours” (Klein-Pejšová 2012: 25). The region of Slovakia had the biggest Jewish population in Czechoslovakia, and its Jews spoke predominantly German, Yiddish and Magyar, apart from having some knowledge of the local language (2012: 20-28). The state voluntarily supported Jewish minority rights to the extent of creating a “new category of political nationhood available on the Czechoslovak census” – the Jewish nationality (2012: 32). Slovak Jews welcomed this opportunity to express their loyalty to the new state, and to mark the transition from their associations with Hungarians. Despite maintaining an inclination to Hungarian culture and language, they “had become Slovak Jews: loyal citizens of Czechoslovakia belonging to the territory of Slovakia” (2012: 37).

The population census from 1930 shows that there were 136,737 Jews affiliated with the Jewish religion in Slovakia (Salner 1997: 8). They lived in 2,262 out of 3,589 Slovak towns (Bárány and Dojč 1991: 5). Considering the possibility

---

3 Later disputes over the territory between these two parties, which, according to James Mace Ward (2015), placed Slovak autonomy under threat, made Slovakia more susceptible to German influence as the young state found itself in a need of protection. The uncertainty surrounding the loyalty of Jewish citizens is crucial for understanding the unfolding of Holocaust in this region (Ward 2015).
that not everyone who was of Jewish descent claimed to be of Jewish religiosity for
the purposes of this census, I take this number of people as an indicator that in 1930
there were at least 136,737 Jews living in Slovakia. This population census also
recorded 167 congregations in the region of Slovakia – of which 107 were Orthodox,
29 Neolog, and 31 ‘Status quo ante’ (Rothkirchen 1971: 103).

The Shoah

A turning point came with the advent of the autonomous Slovak State, which made
antisemitism state doctrine (Salner 1997: 23-31). From the first days of Slovak
autonomy in 1938, “anti-Jewish actions” emerged, worsening after the establishment
of the independent state in 1939 (Salner 1997: 161). The rise of new political parties,
especially Hlinka Slovak People’s Party, exacerbated the effects of state policy
directed against Jews. The government of the Slovak Republic adopted laws that
deprieved Jews of their civil and property rights (Salner 1997: 161). These laws,
according to Peter Salner, served one purpose: to “exclude Jews from society and to
draw up economic and moral conditions for their subsequent deportation from
Slovakia” (Salner 2000: 121). The Aryanization Act of 1940 authorised the
confiscation of Jewish property, and gradually transferred it to the hands of non-
Jews. Other laws prevented Jews from undertaking certain professions, or study in
schools and universities. The Jewish community was presented as unadaptable, and
as a ‘foreign’ part of the population (Salner 2000: 120-125; Jelinek 2009: 318-326).
Jews responded by, for example, emigrating (to Hungary or Palestine), and in some
cases seeking baptism (Salner 1997: 34-35). The state’s anti-Jewish laws also strictly
forbade mixed marriages, and so many Jews tried to save themselves by marrying
‘economically important’ Jews, who were granted so called ‘presidential
exemptions’ by the president Jozef Tiso to avoid deportations. However, these
arrangements did not always fulfil their intended purpose (Salner 2000: 113; Jelinek

In September 1941, the ‘Jewish Codex’ was issued, which “enacted a racial
principle in solving the Jewish question and became one of the most disturbing
antisemitic laws in the modern history of Europe” (Kamenec 2002: 18). On 20th September, 1941, the government published a decree that ordered all Jews older than six years to wear a yellow ‘Jewish star’, six centimetres in diameter, on the left side of the upper garment. The visibility of these badges greatly worsened the social situation of Jews by exposing them to direct physical insecurity and anti-Jewish discrimination. By 7th November, 1942, dual labelling was introduced – economically significant Jews had to wear a star of three centimetres in diameter with the letters ‘HZ’ (an abbreviation for ‘Economic Jew’), while the rest wore stars of 10 centimetres diameter (Salner 2000: 122-123; Kamenec 2002: 19). Related laws under the Code deprived Jews of their possessions, and also their fundamental human rights and freedoms. As a result, the Jewish minority was cast as an “economic and social burden” to the state (Salner 2000). The Nazis provided the Slovak government with a solution to this ‘problem’ by offering to ‘move’ impoverished Jews to Poland for 500 German marks per person. The Slovak government agreed, and in March 1942 began deportations to concentration camps in Auschwitz, Majdanek and Sobibor (Salner 2000). The Slovak Republic thus became “the only country in Europe, which, although unoccupied by the Nazis directly, forced the displacement of its Jewish citizens and executed it by its own administrative power” (Kamenec 2002: 19-21). Contemporary Slovak Jews view the actions of their non-Jewish neighbours during and right after the Second World War (as Chapter Three examines in detail) in terms of betrayal, generating a mistrust that affects all forms of social relationships until today.

The Slovak National Uprising, which began in August 1944, led to the opening of labour camps and allowed Jews to actively participate in the fighting in rebel territories. However, the German occupation that followed ensured the resumption of deportations (Salner 2000: 143-146; Salner 1997: 172; Jelinek 2009: 362-371). According to Eduard Nižňanský (2005: 84), the total number of Jews who were deported in 1942 was 57,628. Ivan Kamenec (1991: 271) adds that in the years of 1944-1945, there were probably another 13,500 individuals of Jewish descent deported.4

4 The Vienna Award of 1938 awarded the southern territories of interwar Czechoslovakia to Hungary. This created a different experience for Slovak Jews living in the area, as deportations to concentration camps were delayed until 1944, two years later than in the Slovak State. Moreover, because these
The situation after 1945

*Shoah* survivors who decided to return home often found their former homes destroyed or inhabited by strangers. Upon realising that they had lost all of their tangible property, and that their relatives would not come back, survivors started to reconsider their futures. In the years 1945-1948, they had two choices. The first was to leave the country and emigrate. With the state creating opportunities for Jews to leave, they most frequently went to Western Europe, Palestine/Israel, North America or Australia. The second option was to stay in Slovakia, to try to assimilate with the majority or learn how “to combine their Jewish descent (and relationship to Judaism) with the recent past on the one hand, and with the frequently changing political situation on the other” (Salner 2000: 149; cf. Heitlinger 2006; Jelinek 2009).

In the light of their *Shoah* experiences, many survivors gave up their faith, and sometimes even completely detached themselves from the Jewish community. Nevertheless, some Jews remained strong in their faith. As early as in 1945, the Jewish community in Bratislava had re-established Orthodox community life (Salner 2000: 151). Overall, 43 religious congregations were restored in the area of Slovakia, compared to only nine in the Czech territory (Heitlinger 2006: 19). After the war, these Jewish congregations were not formed predominantly by believers, but brought together Jews who had left their faith though they still identified with their Jewish descent. The Zionist movement and various Zionist organizations were re-formed as well, and played an important role in the process of emigration to Israel, especially for the younger generation (Jelinek 2009: 383; Singerová 2006). During 1948-1949, around 8,925 Jews legally emigrated to the new State of Israel (Bumová 2006b: 69).

In February 1948, the Communist party came to power. The Jewish community hoped that the new regime would bring social and ethnic equality, and the long-awaited suppression of antisemitism. In 1949, the government adopted a law territories were reallocated to Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, populated with victim statistics and people with experiences of tragedy for which none of the countries wanted to take responsibility, the phenomenon of ‘the forgotten Holocaust’ emerged (Salner, personal conversation; see also Jesenský 2013b). This contributed to the varied social fabric of the present Jewish community in Bratislava, which brings together people with these two distinct experiences of the *Shoah*. 

which guaranteed certain rights and freedoms to all religious groups. However, the totalitarian state controlled their activities – through the Slovak Office for Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, and the Štátna bezpečnosť (ŠtB; State Security) – and tried to eliminate religion from the public sphere (Heitlinger 2006; Jelinek 2009). The enthusiasm of Jewish people for the socialist state system ended around 1950-1951, when Zionism was officially categorised as an anti-state ideology. This shift marked the extinction of the Zionist movement in Slovakia, and the beginning of a new wave of antisemitism (Salner 2000). “Jews were defined as a religious entity [...] Jewish nationality or ethnicity did not exist officially. In the secularising country, Jews were recognised as a purely religious community” (Jelinek 2009: 414). Soon after this, the ruling party led anti-Jewish persecutions, through which the state began to nationalise Jewish collective property – such as buildings, synagogues and even cemeteries. In the 1950s, the state also prohibited the ritual slaughter of cattle and introduced a higher tax on kosher meat (Jelinek 2009; Heitlinger 2006; Salner 2000).

The state’s anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist orientation became more visible in the early 1950s, with the political trials of high political representatives accused of “bourgeois nationalism or Zionism” (Bumová 2014: 64). Among the most well-known show trials was the Slánský trial. Rudolf Slánský, a former secretary general of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and his thirteen co-defendants – “all high party and state officials” – were accused and found guilty of an anti-state Zionist conspiracy and high treason (Heitlinger 2006: 21). Three of the accused were sentenced to life imprisonment, and the remaining eleven, including Slánský, were executed in December 1952. During this widely-broadcast trial, the Jewish origin and ‘bourgeois’ background of eleven defendants was continuously reiterated, highlighting their ‘otherness’ based on descent and class. Even the judge asked whether they understood Czech or needed an interpreter. The question was, of course, irrelevant – the Jewish defendants “spoke the state language at least as well as the judge” (Franek 2008: 8) – but it served the aim of stressing the defendants’

5 The ŠtB was established in June 1945 and, according to Bumová (2006a: 67), its “role was to reveal, document, investigate and sanction true or supposed opponents of the Communist regime, or to repress any expressions of disagreement with state politics.” It concentrated on social groups and individuals that distinguished themselves – ideologically, ethnically, nationally or religiously – from the majority, or were seen as different.
difference from Czech or Slovak citizens. Explicit links were made to the history of assumed Jewish ‘foreignness’ and disloyalty, based on their cultural distinctiveness and language proficiency in Hungarian and German, which in turn fuelled the popular distrust that had sharply constrained their socio-political status during the two previous political regimes – the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) (see Klein-Pejšová 2009, 2012) and the Slovak State (see Ward 2015). According to Alena Heitlinger, this was “the first open official anti-Jewish propaganda since the end of World War II” (2006: 21). During most of the next four decades, Jews and Zionism were regarded as the official enemy of the Czechoslovak state (see Heitlinger 2006; Salner 2008; Jelinek 2009).

During the 1960s, the state changed its policy towards organized religion, and the Communist Party gradually surrendered control over the cultural sphere. In the process of de-Stalinization, travelling abroad became permissible for the first time since the rise of the regime. The Jewish community seized this opportunity to organise a number of trips, and its members participated in a few international gatherings (Heitlinger 2006: 28; Salner 2000: 197). This short-term political liberalisation also brought about a rediscovery of Jewishness among the post-war generation of Jews (Heitlinger 2006; Bumová 2006a, 2009). The situation was quickly changed, however, by the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in August 1968. The occupation caused a mass emigration of younger Jews, leading to a sharp reduction in the Jewish population of Slovakia (Salner 2000: 198, 226; Bumová 2006b; Ratica 2006). The ensuing period of ‘normalisation’ again marked heightened oppression and persecution of the Jewish minority (Jelinek 2009: 420-427).

“Anti-Semitism once again became an integral part of the communist agenda and, like in the 1950s, this racist policy was again hidden under the mask and political slogans of ‘anti-Zionism’” (Heitlinger 2006: 33). On account of their different socio-historical experience, cultural and religious ‘otherness’, distinct language proficiency and transnational social networks, Jews were regarded as ‘untrustworthy’ citizens by the totalitarian regime, and the ŠtB closely followed individuals representing a supposed threat to the state (Bumová 2006a: 67). Surveillance was intensified in the early 1970s, when the Ministry of the Interior
launched operation *Pavouk* (Spider), a “program of surveillance of Czechoslovak Jews” with an “alleged goal [...] to create a card registry of all Jews in Czechoslovakia” (Heitlinger 2006: 34). Between 1972 and 1988/9, the ŠtB produced a list of people they took to be Jewish, whether active or secular Jews, but also including people who did not claim Jewishness at all.6 ‘Undercover’ secret service agents – whether appointed and installed or ‘recruited’, often among neighbours, colleagues or even friends – closely followed their lives.

Some Slovak Jews shared their recollections of instances when agents of the ŠtB even attended synagogue services. Coming in pairs, dressed in coats and hats, they would sit down at the back and observe who was present at the services. For Jews who attended regularly, however, it was clear that these people were outsiders. With time, the ŠtB installed a camera on the street near the synagogue to acquire visual evidence of people coming in. Eugen, whom the ŠtB tried to recruit as an ‘inside informer’, explained to me, “Many were discouraged, it had its consequences, but I did not care. On my way into the shul [synagogue] I waved to the camera and walked in.” Because of the unpredictable consequences of living one’s life according to Jewish traditions, many people decided to keep their Jewishness hidden, and to distance themselves from the Jewish community (see Chapter One). This strategy of ‘careful concealment’, as I call it, disrupted relations within the Jewish community (Chapter Two); and in the light of its apparent disloyalty and lack of courage, it engendered mistrust, which has affected the descendants of those families that ‘disappeared’ until the present day.

The ŠtB meticulously followed the formal but also informal activities and meetings of the young generation in an effort to prevent so-called “racial marriages,” which represented a significant threat to the state’s aims for the assimilation of Jews (Bumová 2006a: 81). In Chapter Five, I show how the surveillance of the ŠtB and the risks it presented relegated Jewish weddings to the sphere of the home, or to spaces far from home, eventually curtailing the number of Jewish weddings. The state’s

---

6 The numbers of surveilled people vary between sources (estimated between 9,000-20,000), and given that the relevant ŠtB documents were destroyed nearing the Velvet Revolution, details remain uncertain. Paradoxically, the ŠtB documents were probably the most precise information ever compiled about the numbers of Jews in the country; even the Jewish Congregations did not keep detailed lists of their members, in order to protect their identities from the ŠtB (see Bumová 2006a: 74).
antisemitism and the ŠtB’s “ongoing surveillance activities over ordinary Czechoslovak Jews,” however, as Heitlinger (2006: 35) poignantly notes, themselves “represented one of the greatest barriers to assimilation” – through their very means of othering. The state policy of antisemitism and anti-Zionism was successfully disrupted only by the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

Jewish life and politics after the Velvet Revolution of 1989

The political revolution of November 1989 resulted in a socio-political change which, in 1990, led to the establishment of the democratic Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. The collapse of Socialist Czechoslovakia brought “profound life-changing consequences for members of the Jewish community” (Heitlinger 2006: 39). In 1990, the newly elected president, Václav Havel, visited the State of Israel in an attempt to communicate the shift in the country’s political orientation, and the end of official state anti-Zionism. His political direction was also followed after the separation and establishment of the Slovak Republic in 1993.

Gradual democratisation created a sense of tolerance, and during the early 1990s the activity of certain Jewish organizations and associations was restored (for example, Maccabi Bratislava). New ones were also created, including the Slovak Union of Jewish Youth (SUJY; see Salner 2000: 199). In 1990, Slovakia had 15 active Jewish congregations (Heitlinger 2003: 52). Of these, only 13 are currently active: in Banská Bystrica, Bratislava, Dunajská Streda, Galanta, Komárno, Košice, Nitra, Nové Zámky, Prešov, Rimavská Sobota, Trenčín, Žilina, and in Piešťany (established in 2009). Larger communities are trying to organise religious activities and the celebration of holy days, and to secure ritually clean food for their practicing members. The smaller ones, too, organize meetings in which the history, traditions and meaning of particular holy days are explained. All communities in Slovakia are actively involved in Holocaust commemoration (Salner 2003: 103-107). Despite the largely secular Jewish population and, within many communities, the incapacity to form a minyan – the quorum of ten adult men required for a communal prayer – the official name of every Jewish community in Slovakia is židovská náboženská obec,
or Jewish *religious* congregation (JRC). In 1993, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish movement, Chabad-Lubavitch, entered Slovakia as part of their outreach programme to bring ‘disaffected’ Jews ‘back’ to observance. Rabbi Baruch Myers and his family moved to Bratislava, and became the town rabbi. In 2007, Rabbi Zeev Stiefel, also Chabad-Lubavitch, moved to Piešťany, a town in Western Slovakia.\(^7\)

Despite these socio-political changes, antisemitism has not ceased to exist (see Bustikova and Guasti 2012). Although ‘the Jewish issue’ was at the periphery of political discourse for years – in part due to a mitigated and delayed coming to terms with the past – displaced by political preoccupations with the Hungarian language or the Roma question (Bustikova and Guasti 2012), it re-emerged whenever political leaders sought to rehabilitate the legacy of Tiso and the wartime Slovak State. The activities of Marian Kotleba, described above, marked one such instance (see Mešťan 2013).

This thesis, in its effort to explore Jewish life in Slovakia, also sheds light on steadily growing extremism in the region. It discusses several political events that have affected the lives of Slovak Jews since the Holocaust, during Socialism, and also after the Velvet Revolution. I follow events preceding my fieldwork as well as those that occurred during it, including the Prime Minister’s speech and Kotleba’s win in the regional elections of 2014. In the following chapters, I show how such political events influence the everyday life of Slovak Jews, and how the chronic insecurity and uncertainty they fuel – together with issues of (dis)loyalty, (mis)trust, ‘otherness’ and belonging they inform – are negotiated when choosing life partners (Chapter Four), planning weddings (Chapter Five), and bringing up children (Chapter Six).

\(^7\) After my fieldwork, in 2015, a Liberal rabbi from Ukraine joined the Bratislava congregation as a refugee from Krym.
Exploring the themes

In this thesis, I explore five main interconnected themes – the politics of Jewishness, and the relationships between kinship, religion and politics; notions of distinction and belonging in situations of insecurity; marriage and continuity; memory, politics and kinship; and knowledge, secrecy and recognition in contexts of mistrust. In what follows, I offer a discussion of the literature relevant to these issues, referring to both local and international scholars, and situate my own work in those debates.

Jewishness, being Jewish and being a Jew: What makes a person Jewish?

Any identification, in social contexts – whether individual or collective – is based on both internal and external definition, and distinctions. A person or a group may see itself as somehow different from other people or groups, but this distinctiveness must also be acknowledged by ‘others’. In this sense, identification is “a product of interaction between the internal perception of members of a group and the external response” (Mars 2000: 158; see also Eriksen 2010a: 71, 2010b; Barth 1969, 1994; Bauman 2001; Cohen 2000, 1982, 1985). In the context I studied, this phenomenon, entangled in multiple layers of perception, involves a variety of ways in which an individual marks their affiliation to a Jewish group, and the group’s distinction from others (see Salner 2000: 229). I explore this identification process and what happens on the boundaries of belonging, when internal and external perceptions do not coincide, and when the search for recognition is an ongoing, fraught process. Through exploring the politics of Jewishness in post-Socialist Slovakia, I show how kinship, religion and politics are deeply intertwined, informing these matters on an everyday level.

Jewish law, the Halakhah, says that a person is Jewish if s/he was born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism according to halakhic principles (Wigoder 1989: 384). Jewishness, therefore, can be based on two factors: physical and social (Glenn and Sokoloff 2010b). Susan Martha Kahn (2000, 2004, 2005, 2010), studying
assisted reproduction in Israel, argues that there has always been a ‘dynamic tension’ between the physical and the social ways of being Jewish. The first claims that Jewishness is based on physical kinship, implying that anyone born to a halakhically Jewish mother is Jewish. The social framing, on the other hand, says that one’s Jewish self emerges from a specific commitment, in which conversion figures prominently. Jewishness, then, is not necessarily based on inherited genetic material, but can be “wilfully assumed by a non-Jewish body” (Kahn 2010: 12). Being thus “simultaneously fixed and fluid,” Jewishness must be understood as “the product of either kinship or commitment, or both” (Kahn 2010: 23; Bilaniuk 2010: 203-205).

The biological principle of the halakhic definition of what makes a person Jewish creates tensions within Jewish communities. And it plays an important role in the politicised context of the Bratislava community in particular, under its ultra-Orthodox Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi. Orthodox communities recognise only Jewish descent as legitimate in the Halakhah. More liberal movements within Judaism – such as Liberal, Reform or Neolog communities – are more open towards accepting converts or non-halakhic Jews as members. Conversions are very rare in Bratislava, and due to their association with Liberal Judaism, they are unrecognised by Rabbi Myers and the more ‘traditional’ or observant part of the community. By prioritising the matrilineality of Jewish descent, the Halakhah creates various difficulties for people whose father or just one grandparent is/was Jewish, despite their own sense of Jewishness. These tensions present a means of exploring Slovak Jewish experiences of kinship, differentially legitimised as ‘biological’ and ‘social’ (see Carsten 2000a, 2000b, 2004; also Schneider 1980; Strathern 1992; Edwards and Strathern 2000; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; McKinnon and Cannell 2013), as well as the relation between practice and personhood (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; see also Astuti 1995, 2000), self-making, and recognition (Bloch 1995; Keane 1997). In the following chapters, I explore what makes a person Jewish in post-Socialist Slovakia, and what criteria make one ‘Jewish enough’, while shedding light on the intertwining of kinship with religion and politics in the context of Slovak Jewish relatedness.

The State of Israel has further influenced the definition of Jewishness. According to the Law of Return, Israel grants citizenship to everyone who can prove

---

8 Differences can be found also within these groups, and some of the liberal communities may also adhere to the halakhic definition.
that s/he has at least one Jewish grandparent (Salner 2000: 8; Barzilai 2010). The knowledge of this fact – which essentially extends the halakhic definition of Jewishness – contributes to the tension between Jewish institutions in the diaspora and people who feel Jewish but do not fulfil the criteria of the Halakhah. The state can also be a component producing a different effect on the individual’s identification with Judaism, as seen in Slovakia during the Second World War. The Slovak State has imposed its definition of Jewishness on people who did not feel Jewish or were not halakhically Jewish. After September 1941, they had to wear a visible yellow badge with the Star of David together with the rest of Jewish population, and thus to face the same grievous fate (Salner 2000; Kamenec 2002).

Given that the term ‘Jew’ “has been highly ambiguous since the beginnings of Jewishness”, its context is crucial (Glenn and Sokoloff 2010a: 9; Magnus 2010). New forms of Jewishness emerged when ‘traditional’ Judaism stopped being the only possible way of life (Webber 2003). With emancipation, secularisation, migration, urbanisation and globalisation, being Jewish started to represent a complex way of identifying with the Jewish people – based on one or a combination of religious, ethnic, cultural or social aspects of Judaism.

This shift, according to Salner (2000), was accelerated after the Shoah, when Jewish communities across Europe attempted to recover and renegotiate their presence in new post-war social and political settings. Leonard Mars, who studied a reconstruction of Jewish community life in post-war Hungary, argues that people tend to identify with Judaism, if they do so at all, on three bases: religious, ethnic and cultural/social (2000: 162). The most common identification of post-war Hungarian Jews, he claims, manifests itself as a cultural ethnicity – in the form of an interest in

---

9 Paragraph 1 of the decree no. 63/1939, issued by the government of the Slovak State, defined that a person, “irrespective of gender or nationality”, is Jewish if: (1) they are or were of Israelite religion, even if they converted to Christianity after 30th October 1918; (2) they are or were without religion and have at least one parent of Israelite religion; (3) they have a parent that fulfils the first two points (except descendants who themselves converted to any of Christian Churches before 30th October 1918); (4) they married a person fulfilling the first three points after the date this decree was issued, during the time of their marriage; (5) they live with a person fulfilling the first three points in non-marital union after the date this decree was issued, as well as descendants conceived in such union. Paragraph 1 of the decree no. 198/1941, known as Židovský kódex (Jewish Codex), defined a Jew, irrespective of gender, as a person who: (a) has at least three Jewish grandparents in view of race; (b) is a “Jewish mixblood, who has two Jewish grandparents in view of race.” […] Paragraph 2 adds that: “A Jewish mixblood according to this decree” is a person: (a) who has two Jewish grandparents in view of their race, if not being seen as Jew according to §1 (b); (b) who has one “racially Jewish grandparent.”
the non-religious aspects of Jewish traditions, culture or history. This ‘cultural Jewishness’, being the least contingent on an individual’s descent, may be constructed via various “secular rituals” such as conferences, seminars or festivals about Jewish culture (Mars 2000: 162-167). In line with Mars (2000), Jennifer Sinclair and David Milner’s work on the lives of young Jews in the UK (2005: 93) suggests that the present situation is characterized by a degree of separation between the religious and ethnic aspects of an individual’s Jewishness (see Liebman 2003: 344; Gitelman 2000).

In the case of Holland, Ido Abram asserts that identification with Judaism is influenced by five aspects of lived experience: Jewish culture, the Holocaust/antisemitism, Israel, “the personal histories of individuals”, and the culture of the society they live in (2005: 2; cf. Dencik 2006). Because people’s experiences vary, Jewishness takes unique forms, and, as Abram suggests, has the capacity to change over one’s lifetime – especially when confronted with multicultural influences (2005: 3; see also Sinclair and Milner 2005: 105-112). In the following chapters, I explore the ways these ideas are complicated and politicised within the Slovak context, and show how young Jews’ sense of belonging is influenced by their older kin’s experiences, memories, decisions and choices, as well as their own understandings of the past.

**Belonging, insecurity and boundaries**

In *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (2001: 1-3), Zygmunt Bauman argues that people seek security, and that it is inside a community that they are most likely to find it. According to him, community – based on the ‘sameness’ of its members – represents a safe environment in which one can trust everyone else, understand and share values and morals, and where one does not feel any threats. At the same time, he suggests, an individual must be very careful outside of that

---

10 By the experience of ‘Jewish culture’ Abram means traditions in which one grew up and lives now, the religious affiliation of family and identification with Jewishness (2005: 3-4).

11 A similar argument was developed by Dencik, who claims that one’s Jewishness in the diaspora is influenced by six aspects of life: three concerning one’s relationship to Judaism and the State of Israel, and another three relating to the majority society (see Dencik 2006: 79-105).
community, and a clear distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ emerges (Bauman 2001: 10-14; Eriksen 2010b). Bauman asserts that the crucial unifying sameness, however, evaporates with increasing social interaction outside of the community (2001: 13). For these reasons, Marion den Uyl (2010) argues that notions of belonging to an ethnic minority group, in a multicultural setting, tend to change over generations. In other words, they are historically specific.

An ethnic group, as Thomas Hylland Eriksen notes, is “defined through its relationship to others, highlighted through the boundary, and the boundary itself is a social product which may have variable importance and which may change through time” (2010a: 45; Barth 1969, 1994). As to the formation and maintenance of boundaries, however, there may be more agents involved (Barth 1994). For example, in the region of the present Slovakia, it was not only the Jewish minority and the Slovak majority who engaged in processes of boundary-defining; the state also had a key role to play. Some boundaries were legally enforced – for example, Jews were permitted to settle in towns only after 1840 – while other boundaries were forcefully diminished, as for instance, when in 1954 the Slovak government forbade the ritual slaughter of cattle (Heitlinger 2006: 24; Salner 2002). In this sense, it is important to apprehend boundaries and their markers within their specific context.

Apart from the intergroup boundaries constructed between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish majority, there are also intragroup boundaries tracing distinctions within the Jewish community itself. These may be between particular movements within Judaism, or, as I discuss in Chapter Two, between people with different experiences of Jewishness. Diversity, according to Sandra Lustig and Ian Leveson (2006: 2-3), is characteristic for European Jewry, with Jewish communities in each country embodying “unique combinations of Jewish culture and the culture around them.” I demonstrate that these distinctions may go further, and occur even within a single community when lived experiences, memories and choices create differences between Slovak Jews. This thesis thus illustrates the ways in which Bauman’s ideas work in practice – but also how they are complicated in the politicised context of the Jewish community in post-Socialist Slovakia, where the everyday is saturated with uncertainty and mistrust.
Fredrik Barth suggests that social and cultural boundaries between ethnic groups are not fixed, but constructed by those groups through their interactions, making identification negotiable (1994: 14-18, 1969: 9-38; see also Eriksen 2010a: 72; Jenkins 1997). Charles S. Liebman (2003) argues that this fluidity of social boundaries, which may intensify in the context of modernity, enables Jews to form their own Jewishness, deciding whether to celebrate Jewish traditions, and which, and whether and how to engage in the life of the community (2003: 343; Gitelman 2000). Eriksen argues that “group identities are under many kinds of pressure in the present era, and identifying with a group can be an insecure and unpredictable task” (2010b: 13; Cutler 2006). Drawing on this literature, I show that the insecurity and risk associated with publicly identifying oneself with the Jewish community motivates young Slovak Jews to employ various strategies of compartmentalisation in their everyday lives – allowing them to maintain several group memberships simultaneously, and, in most instances, to veil their Jewishness from the non-Jewish public. Boundaries, in this sense, prove productive in ensuring safety. Seeing their Jewishness in the light of the past and in their present sense of insecurity, I suggest, directly influences their everyday lives, marital preferences and practices, and the ways they bring up their children.

**Marriage and issues of continuity**

Social scientists studying the post-war reconstruction of Jewish identification in the USA and Western Europe suggest that the continuity of Jewishness and Jewish traditions is threatened by the increasing trend of out-marriage (Chiswick 1997; Cohen 2012; Cohen 2009; Cohen and Kelman 2007a, 2007b; DellaPergola 2001; Dencik 2003, 2009; Kalmijn 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005; Liebman 2003; Phillips 2005; Reinharz and DellaPergola 2009; Sinclair and Milner 2005). Heavily

---

12 This tendency is evident among young Jews in the American and European diaspora, who choose not to affiliate themselves with Jewish congregations, but construct their personal Jewishness on social and cultural bases (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005; Cohen and Kelman 2007b). Sergio DellaPergola claims that this separation from Jewish communities, which affects the construction of group boundaries, results in “unprecedented levels of intermarriage” and assimilation (2001: 17; Graham 2004; Chiswick 1997).
reliant on surveys, these studies produce quantitative evaluations of marriage trends among particular Jewish populations, but tend to lack deeper explorations of the connections between exogamous or endogamous practices and kinship, memory and politics. They also largely neglect central and eastern Europe, where these dynamics produce unique Jewish sociality bearing marks of the past, shadows of the Shoah and changing political regimes. This thesis seeks to address these gaps, and offers insights into how the past influences marital preferences and planning for the future.

As Edmund Leach (1982: 182-3) pointed out, defining marriage cross-culturally is problematic, and in English alone, the term ‘marriage’ refers to at least four distinct senses: the duties and rights between the wife and her husband, and her children; the arrangements transforming the new union and children into a household; the wedding ritual as such; and the relations of alliance with extended families on both sides. The meaning of this word in English, Holy (1996: 48) argues, is thus loose and needs to be considered in particular ethnographic contexts.

Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that marriage plays an important strategic role in processes of social reproduction, and that by choosing the ‘right’ marital partner for an individual, significant family alliances crucial for this reproduction are created (1976: 20-141; Fader 2009: 179-182). While Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) saw the significance of marriage in exogamy, Bourdieu (1976) argued that marriage in many societies is based on essentially endogamous practices, in which partners are chosen in part on the basis of access to similar social and material capital. Ayala Fader (2009) and Samuel Heilman (2006), studying Orthodox Jewish communities in the USA, observed that marriage represents the most important social boundary among various Jewish movements, and between Jews and non-Jewish populations (see also Corwin Berman 2010; Goldscheider 2010; Heilman 2000; Satlow 2006).

Marriage, in its essence, however, implies the crossing of boundaries. Drawing attention to the distinction between biological and social modes of relating, the process of choosing a marital partner and preparing a wedding illuminates the separation between consanguines andaffines – those who are the ‘same’ from those who are ‘other’. By enabling the renegotiation of the divide between public and private, I show in Chapter Four (and Five) how marriage for Slovak Jews creates new kinship links between families with often diverse memories, experiences and
familial practices – thus raising questions of trust and uncertainty, and shedding light on the intertwining of kinship, religion, memory and politics. This entanglement becomes accentuated when the boundaries crossed in marriage are of ethnic, cultural or religious character.

The processes of modernisation and globalisation, Wilma Smeenk argues, result in boundaries between groups becoming more fluid, and people cross them by marrying out more easily (1998: 35-36; Barth 1969: 9-38; De Vries 2006; Eriksen 2010a, 2010b; Jenkins 1997; Webber 1994). The boundaries crossed in such unions may take the form of state borders as well (Breger and Hill 1998; Constable 2005; Brink-Danan 2013).\(^{13}\) Matthijs Kalmijn claims that nowadays an individual’s marital choice is not only influenced by the strength of their ethnic or religious identification, but is also highly dependent on the availability of suitable marriage partners (1998: 418; Chiswick 1997; Liebman 2003; Lustig and Leveson 2006: 12-13).

Holly Wardlow and Jennifer S. Hirsch, in *Modern Loves* (2006), argue that young people around the world increasingly tend to see marriage more as a project of companionship that results in “individual fulfilment and satisfaction, rather than (or in addition to) social reproduction” (2006: 4; Donner 2012). They argue that young individuals, in contrast to older generations, attach great importance to affective bonds between spouses, and their relationships are more often based on individual choice (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006: 1-16; cf. Giddens 1990, 1992; Hart 2007; Mody 2002, 2008; Yan 2003). However, as Fader (2009) shows, the process of choosing a marital partner can be much more complex, and, in many ways, limited in the context of religiously observant groups such as (ultra-)Orthodox Jewish communities. In Chapter Four of this thesis, I show how ideas of romantic love and freedom of choice, which do not pertain only to the young generation, influence young Jews’ marital preferences and strategies in the context of a limited marriage market, and in light of the past and present political insecurity.

---

\(^{13}\) Spouse selection, Rosemary Breger and Rosanna Hill argue, is constrained by various social or even legal factors (1998: 3). The state’s legislation and its definition of “what constitutes a marriage, who can marry whom, and its immigration policies also play a great, but often overlooked, role in limiting choice of spouse” (Breger and Hill 1998: 4). Constable (2005: 4), observing the gender patterns in marriage migration, argues that the “majority of international marriage migrants are women, and most of these women move from poorer countries to wealthier ones.”
Within theological debates on Judaism, marriage has been seen as “a Divine command […] a means of personal fulfilment […] the natural and desirable state of every adult” (Wigoder 1989: 461; see Baskin 2010; Marcus 2004). Salner suggests that the institution of marriage is the basis for the creation of a Jewish family, in which “attitudes towards Judaism, and religious or secular education are formed, traditions are conveyed (or lost), and Jewish identity is constructed” (2002: 25; see Baskin 2010; Biale 1984; Spiegel 2009; Wright 2003, 2012). Paula E. Hyman (1995) and Steven M. Cohen (2012) argue that endogamous marriage is crucial in securing the continuity of Jewishness and Jewish traditions in the diaspora. As Sergio DellaPergola contends, marriage patterns and trends of endogamous or exogamous marriage do not influence just the lives of the spouses involved, but affect the “whole chain of group continuity in the longer term” (2009: 34; see Gitelman 2012; Graham 2004; Phillips 2005). Intermarriage, thus – as appreciated by the Soviet authorities (Gitelman 2012: 295; Bumová 2006a) – is a political issue. Many social scientists argue that out-marriage will “eventually eliminate the Jewish people,” but Keren R. McGinity – studying the impact of intermarriage on the lives of Jewish-American women – suggests that it is rather an aspect of transformation and may not necessarily represent a crisis (2009: 3; see Frankental and Rothgiesser 2009; Wright 2012). Much like Calvin Goldscheider and Alan Zuckerman (1984: 225-226), McGinity (2009) observes that many out-married Jews continued to identify as Jewish, and take active roles in community activities. Therefore, she states, although Jewishness is “dynamic, constantly interacting with and being influenced by environmental factors, such as partner and lifestyle” (2009: 6), the assumption that intermarried Jews assimilate to the culture and religion of their spouses is not ethnographically justified (2009: 5-7).

In Chapter Four, I show that when considering marital preferences and practices, we must pay attention to what Slovak Jews understand as endogamy, and how they see the boundaries that define it. I demonstrate that for young Jews, marrying a Jewish partner means marrying someone who shares the experience of being a descendant of a Shoah survivor, and who understands what it means to come from a family affected by this catastrophe. In this sense, young Jews in Slovakia, I
suggest, extend and redefine the boundaries of endogamy to incorporate unions that observers might otherwise regard as exogamous.

In the Jewish diaspora, it appears that the main concern for Jewish communities is how the children of mixed unions are brought up, and how their upbringing will affect the “future of the Jewish people” (McGinity 2009: 7). According to Sylvia B. Fishman (2004), gender plays an important role in the social reproduction of Jewishness. If the mother is Jewish, she argues, the whole interfaith household tends to lean more towards Jewishness “in every measurable aspect of Jewish life” (2004: 85-87; McGinity 2009: 9). Studying in-married, intermarried, and non-married young American Jews, Cohen argues that there are considerable differences in affiliation, interest and knowledge between these three groups, and shows that once an in-married couple becomes parents, the level of their engagement with the community and their interest in Jewishness rises (2012: 151-153). As Rosemary Breger and Rosanna Hill suggest, in a multicultural society one’s Jewishness tends to be relational and situational (1998: 8; Eriksen 2010a) – even more so for children of exogamous marriages, whose notions of belonging and identification can change not only with age and transitions in their life-cycle, but in ways that “closely reflect changing relationships at and outside home” (Breger and Hill 1998: 5), as well as political or social contexts (Maxwell 1998). In Chapter Four, I explore the role gender plays in the decision-making process of young Jews when choosing their life partners; and in Chapter Five, I show how such choices influence the character of the wedding ritual and its recognition by the community. Chapter Six reflects on these discussions to demonstrate how young Jews, many of whom themselves come from mixed families, approach their own family lives and the upbringing of their own children – in both endogamous and exogamous unions.

Memory, politics and kinship

The intersections between memory and marriage are particularly prominent for Slovak Jews. As Frances Pine suggests, kinship and memory are “interwoven so intricately that disentanglement is impossible” (2007: 104; Carsten 2007a, 2007b;
While work on memory usually focuses on political events, and scholarship on kinship “highlights the symbolic elaboration of the everyday world of the family” (Carsten 2007b: 4), my work places these perspectives together - by studying the transmission and concealment of knowledge and memories of relatedness. In Chapter One, I show how these were influenced by the Holocaust, the Socialist regime, and the Velvet Revolution of 1989 in particular.

‘Critical events,’ Veena Das (1995) argues, can dramatically change the everyday life of people affected by them, and shatter their local worlds. Such events induce new modes of action, which involve creating different strategies for negotiating one’s personhood and one’s relationships to others (Das 1995: 4-6, 2007; Carsten 2007b: 4). After the war – and especially since 1948, when the Socialist state adopted secularising policies and started to persecute religious behaviour in the public sphere – people had to find new ways of negotiating their Jewishness. Common strategies mostly resulted in concealing Jewish roots and related wartime experiences to avoid discrimination and persecution (Salner 1997, 2000). Memories were hidden and not discussed at home, and the demolished parts of the Jewish quarter served as a reminder, for those who could remember, of a past erased from public memory. The management of memories, together with strategies for their transmission or concealment, took on unique forms affecting not only the lives of survivors and their children, but also the communal recognition and belonging of young Slovak Jews today.

Paul Connerton (1989) describes memory as both a process and a practice. For Maurice Halbwachs (1992), individuals form and gather their memories via membership in various social groups, whether based on religion, kinship or political affiliation (see Pine et al. 2004; Lambek and Antze 1996; Kugelmass 1996; Nora 1989). According to Connerton, a very important role in the transmission of recollections is played by the older generations who educate and share knowledge with their descendants. This social remembering, Connerton argues, is secured through ritual and repetition, in the form of “commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices” (1989: 38-40; Pine et al. 2004).

After the Holocaust, however, many child survivors did not have grandparents or even parents who could teach them about Jewish customs and
practices. Despite the silence around Jewishness and memories of the Shoah, descendants of survivors share particular vicarious memories of traumas experienced by the war generation, which bind together all those who identify with this collective memory (Climo 1995; Lambek and Antze 1996; Valensi 1990). Whether their transmission has been open or more concealed, these ‘postmemories’ of Holocaust trauma are based on powerful emotions and may be passed through several generations (Hirsch 1999: 8, 2008; Feuchtwang 2007; Pine et al. 2004; Kidron 2009, 2012). By using the term ‘postmemory’, Marianne Hirsch aimed to describe “the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experience of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but are so powerful, so monumental as to constitute memories in their own right” (1999: 8; see also Pine et al. 2004). Although their parents often could not, or consciously decided not to, speak about the war, the children of survivors still grew up in an environment saturated with sadness and a sense of intimate loss. As Stephan Feuchtwang (2005) notes, it is this second generation which then needed to find a way to come to terms with what they saw at home and the national narratives of these events they learned at school (see also Carsten 2007b: 5; Feuchtwang 2007; 2011). In the context of such critical political events, Janet Carsten suggests, kinship emerges as “a particular kind of sociality in which certain forms of temporality and memory-making, and certain dispositions towards the past, present and future are made possible, while others are excluded” (2007b: 5). But as the state is “heavily implicated in the transmission of kinship memories” (Carsten 2007b: 21), how then are these memories transmitted, reproduced and (re)constructed within changing social and political contexts?

As the past is contested not only at a certain moment, but tends to transform and shift over time (Pine et al. 2004: 3; see Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Radstone and Schwarz 2010), the state and political change play significant roles in the understanding of memory, religion and politics (Pine et al. 2004: 2). The past, for Slovak Jews, was disrupted by the Shoah, and then four decades of a secularising Socialist regime with an anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist ideology, strictly forbidding religion in the public sphere. As I show in Chapter One, the survival of Jewish traditions was relegated to the privacy of domestic kinship, where memories may
have been reproduced via rituals hidden “under the cloak of the house” (Pine 2007: 105; see Gruber 2002; Heitlinger 2006). Given the secular efforts and antisemitic policies of the regime, one’s Jewishness was better kept hidden from the public, and was often silenced even within the intimate circles of some families.

The state, via surveillance by the ŠtB, tried to influence not only the everyday life of the Jewish community, but also to interfere with attitudes towards endogamous marriage, and the planning and celebration of weddings (Bumová 2006a). Through a series of constraints, the state strove to prevent so-called “racial marriages” between young Jews, and thus to create an assimilated and ethnically homogenised Socialist society (Bumová 2006a: 81). The interference of the state in the intimate negotiations of marriage produced mistrust that deeply affected both familial and romantic relationships.

As Carsten suggests, personal, familial and national histories are intertwined in a complex way, and the “history of kinship is always, among other things, a political history” (2007b: 22). Both transmissions and concealments of memory, as well as of relatedness, occur within and are affected by the politics of the state (Carsten 2007b: 22). Pine et al. (2004: 1) assert that the fall of state socialism, together with its “hegemonic hold on memory and history production”, has engendered “an outpouring of counter memories and histories hidden, ‘forgotten’ and forbidden under the intrusive discipline of the socialist regimes.” When the transmission of memory is disrupted, however, different generations and individual members of the family may “embody different temporal dispositions as well as taking on different national, religious, political, and familial affiliations” (Carsten 2007b: 24). This thesis explores the effects the political change of 1989 has had on the lives of Slovak Jews in the light of the previous two political regimes, and two decades of post-revolution developments. I begin in Chapter One with the direct impact of 1989 on the transmission of knowledge and the revelation of the family secrets; Chapters Two and Three pursue the ways in which this newly-acquired information about one’s Jewishness is negotiated across the borders of private(s) and public(s).

Distinguishing between shared collective or social memories (Halbwachs 1992), family memories transmitted across generations of kin, and personal
memories, Pine considers how these three levels of remembering may be “continually interacting, and forming and reforming each other” (2007: 123; Boyarin 1994; Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Wright 2012). Memory thus forms, alters and enhances the present, and simultaneously “maps the future” (Teski and Climo 1995: 3; Radstone 2000). Along the same lines, Sandra Wallman argues that contemporary images of the future not only influence the future, but can affect the present to the same extent as do memories of the past (1992: 2; Golden 2001; Malkki 2001; Rabinow 2008; Strathern and Stewart 2004).

A wedding is, in its essence, a ritual which connects the past with the future via interpretation and imagination in the present. It is through marriage – being a means of social reproduction (Bourdieu 1976) – that a new family is created, that the next generation of Slovak Jews is born and brought up, thus influencing the future of Slovak Jewry. In Judaism, the wedding day is regarded as bride’s and groom’s personal Yom Kippur, a new beginning in each person’s “relationship with God and others, preceded by a period in which one seeks forgiveness from those previously wronged, visits the mikvah [a ritual bath] and fasts” (Wright 2012: 97; Marcus 2004: 124-192). As Melanie J. Wright suggests, memory is cardinal to Judaism, and it is via remembering that the distance between the present and past is collapsed (2012: 132; Yerushalmi 1996). Memory, thus, serves as another dimension of continuity (see Wachtel 1990: 110; Pine et al. 2004). The Jewish wedding ceremony, while marking the commencement of a couple’s new life, also demands the symbolic (and actual) remembrance of past events – as, for example, in the breaking of a glass, which reminds Jews that even in times of happiness, people should keep in mind the shattering events of the past (Wright 2012: 97). In other words, weddings maintain and remind people of the continuous relationship between the past and future.

In the Slovak context, I suggest that a chuppah (a marriage canopy) wedding in particular serves as a powerful means for young Jews to demonstrate their devotion to the heritage of their ancestors, which marks the present and influences the future (Chapter Five). As I show below, a chuppah ritual plays an important role to negotiate the range of social distinctions to which they are subject. It marks a line between the state of being in which it is necessary to prove one’s devotion, and a new state of social recognition marked by having a Jewish partner and a Jewish
wedding. Due to the strength and lasting effect of such evidence, no further demonstration is needed to secure one’s status within the community. Young Jews tend to pay attention to demonstrations of their belonging to the ‘Jewish public’ again only when their children are born, and new signs of maintaining Jewishness through socio-cultural reproduction are expected.

Noting that current interpretations of the past influence our experience of the present, Nancy D. Munn suggests that the present is always infused with new images of the past and future (1992: 115; see also Boyarin 1994; Pine et al. 2004; Das 2007). Václav Hubinger (1996: 17; Harris 1996) argues that it is impossible to strictly separate the past from the present and the future, as these three “temporalities are neither clearly delimited nor clearly delimitable since more than anything else they represent culturally unique, political and social contexts that follow one another in time.” As Chapter Three suggests, for young Slovak Jews, the past – especially familial memories and experiences of the Shoah – manifests a constant presence in their present. This remembering may be seen as a relational or, in Michael Lambek’s terms, “moral practice” (1996: 239; see also High 2015; Yerushalmi 1996[1982]), establishing certain relatedness and enabling young Jews to reflect on the present. Kept in mind as a reminder and point of reference, constituting a part of their present, it informs their decisions and choices, and thus also influences the future.

**Knowledge, secrecy, recognition and (mis)trust**

Knowledge is produced in social relations, which are intrinsically maintained through the continuous activity of knowing (see Barth 2002; Harris 2007). What, however, happens when knowing is interrupted or transformed through personal choice or by political events? Kinship, constituted through shared experiences and substance, is often understood in positive terms of inclusion; but it also enables hierarchies and exclusions (see Carsten 2013; Lambek 2011; Edwards and Strathern 2000; Peletz 2000; Das 1995). These ambivalent qualities are perhaps most evident at points when the familial transmission of knowledge is consciously interrupted.
Such manipulations of knowing, by limiting access to particular information and making it secret, in a sense turns family members into ‘outsiders’.

Many Slovak Jews who survived the *Shoah* decided to hide their Jewishness and to adapt to the lifestyle of the wider society. This veiling of information, for some, required a careful distinction between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres – knowledge circulated freely at home was carefully kept from their non-Jewish colleagues and neighbours. But most Slovak Jews guarded the secret of their Jewishness even within the intimate, ‘private’ realm, keeping it from their close friends and even their children.

Secrecy, according to Georg Simmel (1906: 449), is a “consciously willed concealment,” which creates a “second world alongside of the obvious world” (1906: 462). It thus constitutes a space of refuge – a “transition stadium between being and not being” (1906: 472). Secrecy, he suggests, is crucial for relationships, which are differentiated and characterised by the “ratio of secrecy” involved in them (1906: 462); and its usefulness becomes most evident at times of risk, or when secrets are shared and internalised by a group of people. Such “secret societies,” built around the exclusion of outsiders, are based on reciprocal relations between people who possess common secrets – determining their existence on mutual confidence in guarding those secrets, and securing protection often through invisibility (Simmel 1906: 470; Sözer 2014) and trust, which I discuss below.

Secrecy and a sense of risk or danger, as I demonstrate, are closely linked, but the causality of their relationship is often hard to determine. While secrets may be kept as a form of protection, concealment involves the risk of unwanted revelation, and potentially also threatens social relations and socio-cultural reproduction (see Jones 2014; Debenport 2010). Secrecy’s capacity for inclusion as well as exclusion, I show, sheds light on the fragility and power of knowledge – especially when the secrets kept concern kinship information.

Discovering new kinship knowledge, Marilyn Strathern (1999: 69) suggests, has “built-in effects” on one’s understanding of oneself. Due to its “cultural coupling with identity” (Strathern 1999: 68), kinship information produces ‘constitutive knowledge’ that affects not only how individuals see themselves, but also how they relate to others (see Carsten 2007c, 2007d). Newly acquired knowledge about one’s
ancestry, then, possesses the power to reconfigure relationships. The effects, according to Strathern, are immediate; “the relationships come into being when the knowledge does” (1999: 78; see also Strathern 2005; Carsten 2007c, 2004, 2000c). In the particular context of this thesis, as Chapter One shows, the knowledge acquired when family secrets veiling Jewishness are unveiled is indeed constitutive, and regarded as life-changing – not only because it was hidden for a long time by kin, but also, I suggest, because of its simultaneous familial and political character.

This thesis draws on the literature above to explore how secrecy may be productive, and what it does to social relations – whether they are based on kinship, or of an amicable or romantic character. The following chapters shed light on how Slovak Jews encounter, rework and reproduce the boundaries of secrecy surrounding their Jewishness (and who may know), and show how the strategies of what I call ‘careful concealment’ are motivated and sustained by a sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and the fragility of trust.

The power of knowledge becomes more apparent when practices of secrecy become ‘public’, as strategies of concealment and taboos within public discourse at the state level, which in turn affect public memory. In Slovakia, this is evident in the state’s veiling of details surrounding the Shoah and the role of the wartime Slovak State in the deportations of its Jewish population, which are not fully disclosed in school history textbooks (see Salner and Salnerova 1999). This sort of knowledge, however, needs to be “activated in relationships” (Carsten 2007c: 422), and supported through acknowledgement. Chapter Three shows how this lack of historical knowledge among the wider public, from the perspective of young Jews and their older kin, prevents recognition of their troubled past, and that silences – while potentially productive on an individual level – may be detrimental for relationships across the social sphere.

14 This practice, of course, deliberately limits the knowledge of the younger generations. The reaction of several politicians to the results of the governmental elections in 2016, and Kotleba’s far-right party winning 10 per cent of the seats, produced a discussion about making trips to the Auschwitz extermination camp compulsory in school curricula. But even this suggestion overlooked the fact that there are several places connected to the catastrophe of the Holocaust and deportations in Slovakia itself – including, for example, the labour and concentration camp in Sereď, which was turned into the ‘museum of the Holocaust’ in January 2016.
In the post-*Shoah* context of the Jewish diaspora, there are two forms of recognition desired: the recognition of what happened during the *Shoah* (see, for example, Feuchtwang 2011, 2003) and the recognition of an individual’s Jewishness (see Lorenz 2015, 2016; Reszke 2013; Egorova and Perwez 2013). While the former is of a more outward character, looking for acknowledgement from non-Jews, the latter is rather an ‘internal’ matter for the Jewish community.

As discussed above, the question of what makes a person Jewish has a multi-layered response, depending on who is asked and who is asking, though it usually reflects to some degree the “blood logic” of the *Halakhah* (Glenn 2002: 140). In the post-Socialist context of a small, aging Jewish community in Poland, Jan Lorenz (2015) argues that the matter of accepting new converts also speaks to issues of ethics and morality. Focusing on the politics of Jewishness and practices of creating and maintaining diverse social distinctions (see Bourdieu 1984), Chapter Two shows how many young Jews, upon uncovering the family secret and discovering their Jewish roots, were faced with various levels of openness and suspicion when they approached organised community life. While most of the literature on Jewish identity focuses on issues surrounding blood or conversion, my thesis shows that, for young Slovak Jews, communal recognition and acceptance is also based on – or limited by – the past strategies of their older kin, understood in the terms of loyalty, betrayal, and (mis)trust.

Negotiating their Jewishness within the space of community, young Jews express a need to demonstrate their devotion and belonging in order to gain social recognition. Much as a marriage among the Zafimaniry is gradually made visible and recognised as successful through having children and building a house (Bloch 1995), the acceptance of young Jews upon discovering their Jewishness after 1989 – often referred to as ‘new Jews’ – into the Jewish community had a processual character. Rather than being taken as Jewish, these young people from ‘unknown’ families were *becoming* Jewish, through a process of acquiring knowledge, demonstrating allegiance, gaining recognition, and building trust. Recognition, here, is essentially a social and political process, involving an exercise of authority (Keane 1997: 15). Surnames were often changed after the *Shoah*, due to their capacity to communicate information about kinship, ethnicity and religion, and thereby make Jews
dangerously legible to the state and the public (see Scott 1998; Lambek 2013a; Brink-Danan 2010, 2012). This protective strategy, as Chapter One shows, resulted in anonymising and distancing families from the Jewish community. Young Jews, however, on re-entering the community, realise the power of names to express as well as to constitute relations (see Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006); and the performative act of naming their children, in particular, becomes a means to demonstrate their devotion (Chapter Six).

The materialisation and visibility of signs of identification and devotion are crucial for recognition, but they also create risks of communicating unintended messages (see Keane 1997; Howe 2000; Jones 2014). The different media that enable the demonstration of identification with Jewishness – such as speech, the body and its movement, or material culture – may easily become a means of betraying oneself. Scholarly discussions on gender and the public/private divide emphasise the changing quality of this division in historical perspective (see Gal and Klingman 2000; Gal 2002; Pine 2002; Verdery 1996). I suggest that, in the context of the Slovak Jewish community, the boundary between the ‘private’ and ‘public’ is elastic – being stretched and shrunk to produce and maintain a ‘safe space’ where young Jews can demonstrate their devotion and identification to the audience of the ‘Jewish public’, while keeping it invisible from the unpredictable and potentially risky outside.

The need for demonstration, I suggest, is rooted in the lack of knowledge and the uncertainty it produces in the politicised context of post-Socialist Slovakia. While knowing makes trust unnecessary, the absence of even a partial knowledge precludes the possibility of trust (Simmel 1906: 450).

Many social scientists have argued that religion, through collective rituals, promotes group solidarity and stability (see, for example, Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Douglas 1966; Turner 1969). Through religious rituals – which often entail “significant proximate costs, such as time, energy, and material costs, as well as physical and psychological pain” (Sosis 2005: 8) – signals of confidence and trust are recognised. The performance of such ‘costly’ behaviour demonstrates and engenders loyalty and commitment to the group; thus, it enhances trust and facilitates
cooperation (Sosis 2005: 9, 2003; Sosis and Alcorta 2003). Distinguishing between ‘closed’ and ‘opened’ religious communities, Richard Sosis (2005) argues that trust plays a more important role in the latter ones. Small closed communities, in which group membership is clearly marked through outer symbolic markers (such as hairstyles or clothing) and ritual practice, have the capacity to control and discipline untrustworthiness via reputation. Where group boundaries are more fluid and individuals identify with multiple groups, however, these mechanisms do not have the same effect; and as such, ‘open’ communities need to rely on demonstrations or proof of individual commitments in order to foster trust (Sosis 2005: 4). While Sosis claims that religious practice is crucial, this thesis examines various levels of social life in which young Slovak Jews employ diverse strategies to demonstrate their devotion and sense of belonging – from attending cultural events, to learning Hebrew, choosing a Jewish partner, having a Jewish wedding ceremony, and giving children Jewish names or enrolling them in Jewish kindergartens.

Recent anthropological scholarship on trust sheds light on the ‘darker side’ of kinship and intimacy, proposing that dangers of betrayal are ever-present even within the most intimate layers of social life (see Kelly and Thiranagama 2010; Thiranagama 2010; Geschiere 1997, 2013, 2016; Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016; Feuchtwang 2010; Rév 2010). Trust is built on uncertainty (Sosis 2005; Simmel 1906); we trust because we cannot be certain (Kelly and Thiranagama 2010: 14). Trusting is an unstable condition when an individual does not have the complete knowledge to make trust unnecessary, but at the same time, there is enough knowledge (however ambiguous) which enables him to trust. The act of trusting takes place across the divide between the ‘private’ and ‘public’, and, while it takes time to evolve, it can dissolve instantly (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016). As the performance of trust always entails a risk of betrayal, and trust is brittle, relationships based on it are similarly fragile.

While for Sharika Thiranagama’s study (2010: 134), “[e]thnic lines drew the boundaries of treason”, Slovak Jews experienced betrayal as crossing the lines marked by religion or ethnicity. They felt betrayed by their non-Jewish neighbours during the Second World War and after returning home, and also by Jews who ‘disappeared’ from community life during Socialism (Chapter Two). I explore the act
of trusting, how trust and mistrust are produced, and what trust, or the lack thereof, does to social relations among both the ‘betrayers’ and the ‘betrayed’ – those Jews who may not be entirely trusted, as well as Jews who do not trust completely. The following chapters show how mistrust permeates the everyday life of Slovak Jews. It is not only present in interactions with the non-Jewish public, it is deeply entwined in relationships within the Jewish community. Mistrust, I suggest, creates and maintains distinctions and weakens social relations, especially in profoundly insecure contexts where trusting would be too risky (Chapter Two and Three). It is the politics of trust, and its fragility, that makes young Jews belonging to the ambivalent category of ‘new Jews’ feel a persistent need to prove their devotion and belonging – essentially their trustworthiness – to gain recognition and acceptance.

**Methods**

I arrived in Bratislava in early November 2012, and spent more than fourteen months learning about Jewish life in this small, protective community. Although I would have liked to live with a Jewish family to experience Jewish domesticity and intimacy, it would have been unrealistic in the post-Socialist urban context of Bratislava – not only because I was a non-Jewish ‘outsider’ and a researcher, but also because of the legacies of Socialism and ŠtB surveillance. The mistrust and suspicion acquired during and after the war (as Chapter Three discusses), and transmitted across generations, made people careful to protect the privacy of their homes. Over the course of my fieldwork, however, I realised that staying on my own, unconnected to any particular family, provided me with a sort of neutrality; as such, people of different backgrounds, who took different positions on contested community issues in this very politicised context, felt equally comfortable talking to me.

Some of my informants, who with time became my friends, invited me for dinners in their homes from time to time, where I could meet their relatives, see what Jewish material culture they displayed, and observe the extent to which they claimed their Jewishness at home. But much of young Jewish social life took place outside of
the home, either in the Jewish Community Centre (JCC) or more often in restaurants, cafés and pubs. Meeting for coffee, tea, meals, or drinks in the city centre was an important part of socialising among young people.

Assuming it would be better to live in the district of Staré Mesto (the Old Town), close to the part of the town previously called the ‘Jewish quarter’, I searched for apartments near the JCC. Given the difficulties of the accommodation market, however, I was only able to find a room in a shared three-bedroom flat in Ružinov. Only a 15 minute tram ride outside of the city centre, this green and quieter neighbourhood, to my surprise, was home to many Jewish families and young Jews, including those who had come to Bratislava from other Slovak towns.

During my fieldwork, I found that many people had decided to move out of the area associated with the Jewish community after the Second World War or during Socialism. Some left to gain more ‘invisibility’ and anonymity, others because after surviving the Shoah and coming home, they realised ‘home’ had been destroyed or given away. The destruction of a large part of what was left of the old Jewish quarter in the 1960s motivated others to find new homes in the outskirts of the city. While a few Jewish families still lived in Staré Mesto and the area relatively close to the JCC, a large majority of Jews lived in other city districts, including Ružinov, Nové Mesto (the New Town), Petržalka, Dúbravka and Karlova Ves.

---

15 Most young Jews who come from Bratislava still lived with their parents due to the high demand for flats, limited options and elevated prices. Some lived with their long-term partners.
Upon my arrival in Bratislava, I contacted people I knew from my previous research and time living in the capital. With the assistance of Dr Ivica Bumová, I was affiliated with the Department of Jewish Studies at the Comenius University in
Bratislava, who generously allowed me to use their library and desk space. Meeting Dr Peter Salner, at the time the Chairman of the JRC in Bratislava, marked the ‘real’ beginning of my fieldwork. He enthusiastically offered to help, and invited me to an event organised by the JRC to celebrate the festival of Hanukah – called Chanukiáda. This event was one of the most well-attended of the year and, being by invitation only, it was an excellent chance to get my first sense of Jewish community life in Bratislava.

Returning to Slovakia to do fieldwork was more challenging than I had anticipated. I was in my home country – yet far from home. With every week of my fieldwork, and each new piece of information about the troubled past and the insecure present, I felt driven further and further from my previous sense of ‘home’ and ‘self’. With every step, I undertook a journey of relearning who I was and rethinking where I felt I belonged (or where I wanted to belong). This journey involved shame and guilt as I acquired new knowledge about my country’s history, and stimulated a gradual rediscovery of appreciation for my Slovakness. I was forced to reflect on my positioning as a Slovak, non-Jewish ethnographer, and on my methodological approach. I gave people space and time to get to know me, answering their questions and sharing my experiences and information about my family when asked. When I began my fieldwork, I knew that relationships of trust would need to be established gradually. I immersed myself in the Jewish community to the extent my informants let me, and with time, several of them became my friends. I chose not to force things to happen, but rather to let them evolve ‘naturally’, which enabled me to gain some trust and respect in the eyes of community members.

Gaining access was not, therefore, a single-event matter, but rather a process involving a series of negotiations with different groups of people, themselves of varied ‘hierarchies’, undertaken when I approached different spheres of organised Jewish communal life. As my friend Alena once stated, referring to the difficulties

---

16 I come from a small town called Sučany, near Martin, in North-Central Slovakia, which is a four-hour train ride from Bratislava. My parents live there, and during my fieldwork, when there was a gap in Jewish religious and social calendar, I travelled for a weekend to visit them and have a break. I visited them less frequently in the second half of my fieldwork, when deeper involvement in the community life and stronger relationships created opportunities to fill free weekends and made me feel I should not miss out.
she experienced while searching for a Jewish life partner, “One cannot just ask people on the street whether they are Jewish”. In a similar way, my research depended on meeting people within ‘Jewish spaces’, or at events organised outside of them, and on the help of my informants suggesting further individuals to talk to. While I later made contacts by meeting people at various events, at the very beginning of my fieldwork, I had to rely on ‘snowballing’, and on people suggesting (often one by one) their relatives, friends or acquaintances as potentially good informants for my project. This ‘chain referral’ method was very helpful throughout my fieldwork, and enabled me also to meet and interview people who led their lives separately from the Jewish community, whom I would not have met otherwise.

Such suggestions were often accompanied by sharing contact information for a specific person – whether a telephone number or an email – or sometimes by introducing me in person. Interactions like these would often result in an exchange of business cards, creating a sense of ‘officiality’ that many people seemed to appreciate. This process was always followed by making an appointment and agreeing to meet on a particular day at a specific time and place. Most of the meetings and interviews took place at the homes of my informants, in cafés or restaurants, at the JCC, or at their workplaces. When meeting in the public spaces of cafés, for example, people would often make sure not to talk too loudly, whispering or leaving out terms such as ‘Jewish’ or ‘non-Jewish’ and substituting them by referring to whether someone was ‘from the community’ or not, thus shedding light on the issues of insecurity discussed in Chapter Three.

Terms such as identita (identity), generácia (generation) and pamätanie (remembering) were used regularly by my informants. Although I am aware of the limitations of the word ‘generation’, I use it in this thesis the way my informants did – to mark the differences between children, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, and in that way to distinguish between groups of people who survived the Second World War, who were born and reached their adulthood during Socialism, and who became adults after 1989.

My informants belonged to all of those generations – being between the ages of 18 and 95 – and came from diverse Jewish backgrounds. All were born in
Bratislava or other Slovak towns and villages, but at the time of my fieldwork had lived in Bratislava for several years. I conducted oral histories and interviews with people from the war, post-war and the present young generations. To make people feel more comfortable talking about their lives – especially as shared memories and experiences were of a very personal and often sensitive nature – I asked my informants to start with telling me about their childhoods. Leaving space for what they felt was important to tell, and appreciating what was shared with me, I gently guided their stories with open questions, which often led to their familial pasts, the experiences of their parents and grandparents (or even great-grandparents), and the lives of their children and grandchildren. This approach enabled me to learn about the lives of different generations within a family, and often also about those of friends. When possible, I interviewed relatives of contiguous generations – placing the information one shared in the context of stories heard from their relatives – which allowed me to trace shifts in practices between people who survived the Shoah, those who were raised by survivors during Socialism, and those who were brought up after 1989 by the previous two generations. This strategy enabled me to trace socio-cultural transmission, and the effects of different political regimes, personal and familial experiences on that process.

Throughout my fieldwork, I scheduled interviews and oral histories with people with whom I was not in regular contact, or to whom I had been referred by others. With people whom I met several times a week and had more ‘natural’ relationships, I tended to have more informal conversations, and tried to spend time with them both within and outside of ‘Jewish spaces’ on a regular basis. I left the formal, recorded oral history interviews with these friends to the last several months of my fieldwork, when our relationships were based on trust and shared knowledge about one another. This slight delay enabled me to raise questions about issues that my informants might have not thought about mentioning, and to receive answers that might have been hard to share if such a relationship had not existed. Reflecting on my approach retrospectively, I believe my careful and gradual involvement enabled me to gain access that would have not been possible otherwise.

Apart from everyday conversations with people, I formally recorded interviews and oral histories with 61 Slovak Jews. Throughout this thesis, I quote my
informants verbatim, always with their consent.\textsuperscript{17} These recordings lasted from between two and five hours. While sometimes I did not want to record some conversations, because it felt that informal chatting was better, in other situations, not recording would have diminished the ‘officialness’ of the interview and my informants’ sense of their contribution to my project. Apart from these methods and participant observation, I also explored how space was used within the JCC; did some archival research; and conducted two focus group discussions, one with around 16 Shoah survivors living in the Ohel David (a senior home established in 1998 for survivors), and the other one with around 25 elderly people and Shoah survivors attending the pensioners’ club on Wednesdays at the JCC. Both were on the topics of weddings and marriage, and memories of Jewish life from their childhood, and from their adulthoods until now. These discussions often led to situations when more was shared with me than with their children and grandchildren, because they believed their descendants did not want to listen, or because survivors did not want to share such upsetting memories with their offspring.

Soon after the Chanukiáda, in December 2012, I was given the contact information of the Chairman of the SUJY, which opened a very important window on the life of young Jews in Bratislava. We met in a café for a scheduled interview, which turned into a conversation taking twice as long as the time agreed in advance, and resulted in his invitation to attend the next SUJY event. From then onwards, I attended all SUJY events (apart from two small trips abroad).

Taking part in various activities and events organised by the JRC and the SUJY contributed to my weekly routine. I regularly attended the weekly pensioners’ club meeting on Wednesday mornings – where my status changed with time from “our friend” to “our youngest ‘member’”, as Milena, a Holocaust survivor who became my friend, would often joke – as well as the rabbi’s Torah reading seminar on Wednesday evenings, and various SUJY events throughout the week. The SUJY organised lectures on various themes concerning Judaism and Jewish traditions, as well as Shabbatons, social gatherings on Jewish holidays, parties, film nights, and small trips around Slovakia or abroad. I also attended one of the biggest and most

\textsuperscript{17} A few citations also come from my detailed notes of events written very soon after.
popular events of the year – the Autumn seminar in Liptovský Mikuláš – where a group of young Jews from the whole of Slovakia and the Czech Republic met.

My research closely followed the Jewish religious calendar, the social calendars of the JRC and the SUJY, and social and political events in Slovakia – including the neo-Nazi march across Bratislava on 16th March 2013, and the regional elections in November 2013 – which affected the lives of my informants. Throughout my fieldwork, I attended all events I could, to the extent that I knew I would be welcomed, and took part in more private events when I was invited and felt comfortable doing so. I scheduled my oral histories and interviews, volunteering for the community and meetings with people in time that was ‘free’. This approach resulted in a very busy schedule that enabled me to explore various aspects of Jewish life in Bratislava.

Following the Jewish religious calendar, I participated in celebrations of all the Jewish holidays, and attended several synagogue services and SUJY festivities, as well as wider-community activities. I also took part in events and activities that were not directly related to my research topic to gain more contacts and widen my knowledge about Jewish life in Bratislava, such as cleaning the Orthodox cemetery on Mitzvah Day. People also invited me to various events they said would be of interest to me. One such event was the Yom Ha’atzmaut (Independence Day of the State of Israel) on 16th April 2013, organised by the Israeli Embassy in Bratislava. Miro went as a representative for the SUJY and, having an extra ticket, asked me whether I would want to join him, pointing out it might be interesting for my research. Indeed, this was the event where I met Klara, one of my key informants and later friend, and several other people – and the shared experience of it strengthened our relationships later when we met at the JCC.
It was my ‘visible’ presence at particular places and events, and often with certain people, that contributed to my status of ‘trustworthiness’ – however fragile – among people who did not know me yet. For most people, seeing me repeatedly at the JCC or at SUJY events, with the rabbi or other respectable community members, made them feel more at ease with me. During my fieldwork, I attended events led by the ultra-Orthodox rabbi, but also those led by Liberal rabbis who came to Bratislava to give a Shabbat service a few times a year, which allowed me to meet people who would not otherwise come to the JCC. At the public lighting of the big hanukiah on the Rybné Square in 2012, a few weeks after my arrival in Bratislava, I stood alone in the middle of an unfamiliar crowd; but at the same event in 2013, I stood next to my Jewish friends, and recognised almost all the people around me. This experience marked for me the transition involved in ‘gaining access’ to the community, and the slow movement in time towards the end of my fieldwork.

Apart from participating in ‘Jewish spaces’, I also followed events related to my research project organised outside of the Jewish context. During my fieldwork, I attended various museum and gallery exhibitions, theatre plays and film screenings about Jewishness, Slovak history and life during Socialism. I also took a Hebrew language course at the Comenius University in Bratislava.
Both my age – I turned 25 during my stay in Bratislava – and my gender had an effect on my fieldwork. Being in my mid-twenties enabled me to establish very good relationships with young Jews, and created a sort of ‘grandparent-grandchild’ relationship with members of the war generation, as Milena often reminded me. People in the pensioners’ club took my questions, my lack of certain knowledge and my enthusiasm to learn as incentives for sharing their wisdom and experiences with me. The informants I struggled the most to talk to were the working adults of the post-war generation, who were the busiest with their work lives and the least active in community life. While men generally felt more comfortable discussing politics and their everyday lives with me than their romantic relationships, women were at ease to share intimate details about all issues of their lives, spanning their romantic relationships, their experiences of motherhood, and their political views.

In some instances, my non-Jewishness might have been marked a limitation; but at others, it was either irrelevant, or made people more comfortable talking to me, enhancing some relationships. Because of the uncertainty and mistrust that permeated community life, being non-Jewish situated me in the same ‘not-entirely-
trustworthy’ category as young Jews of non-halakhic status or unknown familial background. For the rabbi, and other ‘traditional’ members of the community, I was placed in the same group as all non-halakhic Jews and people with traces of Jewish roots two or more generations ago. My non-Jewishness took a more visible role among less Orthodox Jews, when I was an ‘other’ to a group of people representing the spectrum of Jewishness in Slovakia, who were united through their ‘shared otherness’. It was my non-Jewishness, however, that brought me closer to people who were secular and not active in organised Jewish life. They felt at ease discussing their lives with me; as one of my informants acknowledged with relief, “I thought you would be judging my non-observance, I am glad you are not Jewish.”

As the issues discussed in this thesis are sensitive for my informants, I have changed people’s names and, as requested by some, also anonymised the towns they came from or other information that might potentially identify them. Many did not want sensitive information about their Jewishness to travel beyond the ‘safe space’ of the ‘Jewish public’ – and in some instances, the information and stories shared should not even have reached outside of the ‘home’, beyond the ears of the ethnographer. I have respected my informants’ sense of insecurity and privacy. Anonymising the names and sometimes also home towns of my informants, however, does not affect the accuracy of the information communicated and the arguments made in this thesis. Indeed, my informants’ articulated need for discretion illustrates and supports the argument this thesis makes.

Observing how carefully young Jews, and also their older kin, guarded their Jewishness and any signs that could potentially make their ‘otherness’ visible to the non-Jewish public, I learned that what has been transmitted through generations of Jews in Slovakia since the Shoah was a clear message that one’s Jewishness should remain secret. This persistent sense of insecurity, however, was not only a holdover from a dark past; for many Jews, it was a tangible and very present aspect of their daily lives. When I told Klara and Alena about my encounter on the train, I was told

---

18 The only people whose names I used without anonymising them are Rabbi Myers, his wife Chanie, and Rabbi Goldstein, who agreed to being interviewed and to having their answers recorded to appear in my thesis.
that I should know better than to read such a book in a public place. Just as I tried to make the cover of the book I was reading on the train less visible to avoid direct confrontation, my informants felt the need to carefully control the visibility of their Jewishness across two worlds – the safe space of the ‘Jewish public’ and the unpredictable and potentially dangerous outside where Jewishness must be hidden – every day.

**Chapter summaries**

For many young Jews in Slovakia, learning about their Jewishness was not a gradual process. On the contrary: as Chapter One explores, it often involved young Jews uncovering a family secret, causing a rupture in the continuity of their life stories. Chapter One shows that most young Jews learned about their Jewish descent only later in life, after the Velvet Revolution, when some sort of external trigger – whether a classmate’s comment or a history lesson – prompted questions which these young people, often in their teenage years, raised at home. Many parents considered Slovakia’s socio-political situation after 1989 to be somewhat safer and more tolerant, and decided to tell their children of the family’s Jewish roots. For many, discovering their family’s silenced Jewishness came as a surprise. This information, I argue, had far more than an informative character, and proved to be ‘constitutive knowledge’ (Strathern 1999). Acquiring this knowledge changed not only how these young people saw themselves, but also how they started to relate to others, redefining categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in light of their newly informed perspectives on the past. Coming to grips with their Jewishness, I argue, brought about a sense of ‘un-belonging’.

Chapter Two follows what happens after such a discovery, and explores how young Jews negotiate their often newly-discovered Jewishness within ‘Jewish spaces’. Upon uncovering their family secret, many young Jews felt a desire to learn more about their Jewishness and what it means to be Jewish, and decided to approach organised Jewish life in Bratislava – in search of something they could not find at
home. This chapter discusses the obstacles they encountered on their route to learning more, and young Jews’ perceptions of the relative ‘openness’ of different dimensions of Jewish organised life in Bratislava – from the SUJY, to the Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi and his family, to the JRC. I demonstrate that the extent to which young Jews approaching the community feel welcomed and accepted is largely rooted in their experiences of the group boundaries and other people’s knowledge of their familial background. The issue of where they come from, I argue, plays a crucial role in determining their access to and potential position in the community – not only in terms of their parents’ marital choices and the Halakhah, but also in regards to whether they come from Bratislava or other parts of the country, and whether their family was observant under Socialism or ‘disappeared’ from Jewish communal life. Where one comes from and whether and how the family is known, I argue, creates distinctions that young Jews – in their desire for acceptance and recognition – strive to negotiate, and reproduce in attempts to demonstrate their devotion.

This chapter shows how ‘identity politics’ within this particular Jewish community in post-Socialist East-Central Europe have been permeated by politics at large. The choices and decisions made by older kin after the Second World War and during Socialism – often to protect their families – affect the ways young Jews now reaching out to the community are received. The different statuses ascribed to them, I argue, highlight tensions within the previous generations surrounding questions of politics, courage (or the lack thereof), loyalty and betrayal, and raise issues of (mis)trust.

Chapter Three shows how young Slovak Jews navigate their Jewishness outside the ‘safe space’ of their homes and the Jewish community – in the unpredictable outside. Looking at the risk of betrayal from a different angle, where potential ‘traitors’ are non-Jewish others, this chapter explores young Jews’ everyday insecurity, uncertainty and mistrust concerning their relations outside of the Jewish community, and raises questions surrounding the issues of trust and value of knowing.

Upon learning about their Jewishness, young Jews were taught to keep their Jewish descent secret, and never to talk about it outside of the home. Stressing the
need for carefulness, their parents and grandparents transmitted more than many wished for – their fears and insecurities, as much as their values and familial histories. The intergenerational transmission of insecurity, I argue, influenced not only how young Jews saw the past, but also how they see the present and imagine the future. The familial experience of the Shoah created a rupture for people who survived this catastrophe, but also their children and grandchildren. Young Jews often experienced antisemitism in Slovakia more tangibly than their older kin did, and followed the current political situation closely, comparing it to the years preceding the Second World War. Their upbringing, which emphasised the need for carefulness and a suspicion of others, created an inner struggle for many. Despite their efforts to escape the choices their older kin made, and to learn more about and incorporate Jewish traditions into their everyday lives, many young Jews found the strategies of ‘careful concealment’ their older kin employed helpful when facing the potentially unsafe non-Jewish outside. Though they wanted to be proud of their Jewishness, they also felt a deep need to keep it secret. This chapter discusses the politics of Jewishness and its negotiation across the boundary of the ‘safe space’ into the unpredictable outside, reflecting on the markers of ‘otherness’ young Jews guard when crossing this boundary, and the strategies of compartmentalisation they employ.

Chapter Four explores how young Slovak Jews determine what makes a good life partner. It focuses on ways they reconcile their different preferences in the light of their experiences of Jewishness, familial and communal pressure, and tensions arising between their desires for love and freedom of choice, but also ‘sameness’, in contexts of mistrust and insecurity. I show that young Jews prefer to marry endogamously – though their interpretations of ‘endogamy’ are expansive and innovative. While for some, endogamy meant their partners should meet the criteria of the Halakhah, many other young Jews define it in terms of ‘shared otherness’, rooted in being the descendants of Shoah survivors and vicariously sharing that experience. Behind this desire for sameness lies a deeply felt need for understanding which, for many, requires that their partners come from families that were also affected by the Holocaust. These young Jews saw being Jewish as being a descendant of a Shoah survivor, and being raised in a family affected by this
catastrophe. Applying these definitions, young Jews stretch group boundaries and extend the limits of what counts as endogamy. Young Jews’ marital preferences and practices, in this sense, provide insights into what makes a person Jewish. I demonstrate how levels of relatedness, based on ideas of sameness, are created and negotiated, in turn affecting the social structure of the Jewish community.

Sameness – whether in terms of Jewishness and shared values, or in terms of education, religious observance, or socio-economic background – was however confronted with young Jews’ ideas of romantic love and attraction. Some relationships of sameness are simply ‘too close’, creating what I call the ‘sibling issue’. For young Jews in Slovakia, too much familiarity does not leave enough space for the development of romantic feelings and the necessary ‘spark’. An emphasis on choice – often in contrast to their older kin – and the search for the ‘right’ partner, accentuated tensions between ‘sameness’ and ‘closeness’, resulting in a marked preference for ‘foreign sameness’. Reflections on love and attraction revealed a tendency to look for compatibility, creating the possibility of putting the criterion of Jewishness aside to seek compromise. At the same time, finding a partner from the non-Jewish majority society exacerbates issues of (mis)trust, and requires the renegotiation of one’s fears and strategies of concealment – which in turn sets limits on those compromises, and strict expectations of what makes a ‘good non-Jewish’ partner.

Chapter Five focuses on the ideals and practices of Jewish weddings in Slovakia, and shows that ideas about what makes a wedding Jewish have changed over the generations, under the influence of different political regimes. While, during Socialism, the ritual was moved inside and made more ‘private’, today, Jewish weddings seek a highly visible return to an ‘unknown’ tradition. For a wedding to be considered Jewish now, it needs to have a form that was not experienced by parents or even grandparents.

The arrival of the Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi brought a new series of traditions that, in conversation with the local Ashkenazi customs, created an aura of authenticity – accompanied by a set of new limitations. Perhaps most notably, the chuppah ritual was moved from the private and intimate sphere of the home to a more ‘public’ space. I demonstrate that such traditions, although negotiated and often
slightly adjusted, are regarded by young Jews as signs of authenticity, creating a link to the (imagined) heritage of their ancestors. For many young Jews, I argue, it is exactly the ‘costly’ character of the rite that turns the ritual into a powerful means of demonstrating one’s devotion to Jewishness and one’s belonging to the community, while highlighting the distinction this marital choice creates between those marrying within the community and those marrying out of it. Turning this ritual into a ‘community event’, by inviting the whole community to witness it – within the separate space of a ‘Jewish public’ – creates social legitimisation and recognition.

Chapter Six extends these observations by exploring how young Slovak Jews negotiate their plans, choices and decisions involved in bringing up their children, in light of their perceptions of Jewishness, familial and communal pressures, and their own upbringing, as well as their sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The question of how to raise their children condenses young Jews’ understandings of their own Jewishness and being Jewish in post-Socialist Slovakia, and sheds light on how they would like to shape that experience for their children. Focusing on three main areas in which these concerns were visible – the process of choosing a name and naming; decisions surrounding the circumcision of their sons; and choices regarding the education of their children (at kindergarten, school and home levels) – I show that issues of choice, visibility, insecurity, knowledge and recognition play a crucial role influencing decision-making processes. Many young Jews desire a more ‘positive Jewishness’ for their children, but tensions arise from their efforts to negotiate their own Jewishness and new parental roles in an environment they see as insecure. These tensions trace the processes of making children Jewish, and set out what young Jews consider essential, constitutive elements of Jewish personhood – both for their children, and for themselves.
Chapter One

Uncovering the Family Secret: Young Jews Learning About Their Jewishness

Knowing where one comes from plays an important role in constituting a sense of self in relation to others (see Strathern 1999; Carsten 2007c, 2000c). When such knowledge turns out to be untrue or partial, however, a person’s identity and sense of belonging may suffer a rupture – creating an urgent need for re-learning who one is and where one belongs. This chapter explores the experience of discovering one’s previously-unsuspected Jewish roots – an increasingly common experience across East-Central Europe in post-Socialist times (see also Reszke 2013) – and asks what learning such information does. In this chapter, I describe the stories of several young Slovak Jews who discovered their Jewish origin only later in their lives – after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 – when their parents judged the socio-political environment to be safe enough to share this information with their children. These stories highlight how young Jews found out about their Jewishness by describing how they acquired this knowledge; how they reflected on their upbringing in retrospect (and how they reasoned through why they had not known); and how this knowledge changed their way of being, as they undertook to learn more about what it means and entails to be Jewish.

Marilyn Strathern (1999: 69), analysing Euro-American kinship, writes that finding new ‘kinship information’ has “certain built-in effects” on an individual’s sense of self. “Because of its cultural coupling with identity, kinship knowledge is a particular kind of knowledge: the information (and verification) on which it draws is constitutive in its consequences” (Strathern 1999: 68). When an individual learns new information about their ancestry, according to Strathern, they “acquire identity by that very discovery,” because “the information forms (‘constitutes’) what they know about themselves” (1999: 68). Furthermore, being embedded in the context of personal relations, such new information has the power to reconfigure relationships. Knowledge, as Strathern argues, “creates relationships: the relationships come into
being when the knowledge does” (1999: 78; see also Carsten 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2004, 2000c). This ‘constitutive knowledge’ thus defines and creates new ways for people to perceive themselves, but also the ways they relate to others.

In this chapter, I draw on Strathern’s work to argue that learning about one’s Jewish descent is ‘constitutive knowledge’ (1999). It changes the way people perceive not only their family history, but also their own personhood and sense of belonging, and the way they relate to others. While Strathern (1999) and Janet Carsten (2007c) highlight the power of new kinship information – reshaping the ways people relate to their relatives, ancestors, and selves (see Lambek 2013a) – I show that learning about one’s Jewishness has a constitutive effect because it communicates kinship, religious, and political information. For many young Jews, acquiring this knowledge brought about a sense of what I call ‘un-belonging’.19 Upon discovering that they were so different to whom they had believed they were, young people often gradually found themselves feeling that they no longer belonged to the groups they had associated with previously. Rooted in this new information, knowing brought about a sense of alienation. At the same time, the sensitivity of this alienating knowledge – not only in terms of the power it has over self-perception, but also for the outer ascription of otherness – is inescapable. It is the politically unsafe, potentially risky and problematic character of this knowledge that highlights the socio-political significance of knowing. Below, I show how concerns about such risk motivated young Jews’ parents to keep this information secret; and how, upon revealing it, they taught their children to navigate it using a strategy of what I describe as ‘careful concealment’.

The following three sections highlight the relation between knowledge, one’s sense of belonging (or rather ‘un-belonging’ and alienation), and the visibility and perception of the self. First, I describe how young Jews learned about their Jewish descent, from whom and at what stage of their life, and how that knowledge stimulated a process of distancing and brought about a sense of ‘un-belonging’. I

---

19 I use the term ‘un-belonging’ to describe the process of transition from young Jews perceiving themselves as belonging to the Slovak majority, but then finding out they are Jewish, feeling different and not entirely belonging to the same group anymore. The process of alienation here is at the same time conscious but also, to some extent, involuntary. The term ‘un-belonging’, thus, refers to the whole process of realisation, alienation, and distancing, being in the middle, not yet being in a completely different stage.
describe how they learned to navigate such an exposed secret, and how they were taught by their older kin to keep this information silent, exacerbating their sense of ‘otherness’. The second section explores young Jews’ reflections on their upbringing and retrospective assessments of why they did not know about this family secret. I discuss how families silenced Jewishness, and what means they employed to make it less visible. Finally, the last section returns its focus to the time after discovery and observes how young Jews sought to learn more about their Jewishness, and what it means and entails to be Jewish for them – demonstrating that their new knowledge had a constitutive power, stimulating a transformation in their perception of their selves, their sense of belonging, and their allegiances.

The moment of discovery

The stories of how young Jews found out about their Jewish roots tell us a lot about particular families, but also about the life of the Jewish community in Bratislava, and shed light on the intertwining of kinship, religion and politics, and navigating the knowledge of the troubled past. Through exploring how young Jews learned the family secret veiling their ‘otherness’ and the advice that accompanied this new knowledge, I highlight the flow of this kinship, religious, and political information in the context of chronic insecurity, and how this advice influenced the way their newly-discovered Jewishness was perceived.

“I remember that moment like it was yesterday. I was very confused.” Klara, a 34-year-old journalist who came from an endogamous Jewish family, admitted to me that learning about her Jewish origin came as a surprise. “I found out that I am Jewish from my classmate at primary school. For him it was a swear-word, of course.” Leaning closer towards me, she lowered her voice: “He said to the whole class that ‘Jewess Leknová will marry Jew Steiner’. This Steiner was another classmate. He was probably not a Jew, but had a Jewish-sounding name. I do not know how they could tell about me.” When she returned home with this story, her parents told her to forget such silly talk. The question reappeared, however, several
months later, when Klara’s older sister Berenika came home from school also having been told by one of her classmates that she was Jewish. Asking whether it was true, she demanded an explanation.

That was the point their parents decided it was the time to tell the truth. Klara was 15 years old. “They sat us down at the kitchen table and told us about who we are – that we really are Jewish,” she explained. She found it hard to believe. “We learned that our parents come from purely Jewish families, that our grandmother spent the war in hiding and that a large part of our family died only because they were Jewish. It was a lot to process.” With this knowledge, Klara and Berenika were also told about the harm it could cause, and were urged to keep it to themselves. Retrospectively, Klara recalled the incident of her classmate telling her about her Jewishness as the point at which she started feeling she no longer ‘fit in’ – and the point when a long process of searching for herself began.

Though she had a partial knowledge about the presence of Jewishness in her family, Lea, a 28-year-old halakhic Jew, was also first told she was Jewish by a nonrelative. Unlike Klara, Lea grew up aware that her maternal grandmother was Jewish; but because she and her mother were not familiar with the Halakhah, they thought they were not. “I knew about my granny, but because she intermarried and my mom married a Christian too, we thought that my mom is half-Jewish and I am a ‘quarter-Jew’.” Lea recalls that they “lived a Christian life.” The moment when she realised that she was ‘fully’ Jewish, too, stood out clearly in her memory. “I discovered that I am actually Jewish only during my university studies in the Czech Republic. I was interested in learning about other religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. But then I came back to Christianity, and decided to learn Hebrew to read the Bible in its original text.” Lea enrolled in classes offered by the town’s rabbi’s wife. “She spoke only Hebrew and English. One day I told her about my grandmother and she quickly reacted, ‘You are Jewish then too!’ I was very surprised. I did not know what to say, but I liked it.”

While for some, like Klara and Lea, knowledge of their Jewishness came from outside of their families and was subsequently confirmed by their parents, many young Jews acquired this knowledge first from within their families. But even in
these cases, there was an outer trigger that motivated their parents to share this information with their children.

Dagmar, a 35-year-old economist, is one of a very few young Jews who found out about their Jewishness before the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Despite coming from an endogamous Jewish family, she learned about her Jewish background only at the age 10. It was 1988, a year before the political change, and Dagmar was attending the fourth grade of primary school. During a vlastiveda (Homeland Studies) class – a course which focuses on geographic, socio-cultural and historical knowledge about the local region and Slovakia at large – they were taught about the Second World War. “They did not mention directly the word ‘Holocaust’, but told us that something terrible had happened to a group of people.” Sitting at her kitchen table and going through her homework, Dagmar asked her mother “what kind of people were those?” At that moment, her mother – a daughter of Shoah survivors herself – decided to carefully explain “what it was all about.” The reason she gave to her small daughter was that “Jews were different and thus people did not like them.” Recalling the sense of perplexity, Dagmar admitted, “I could not understand then what she meant, because I had a friend who was of Hungarian nationality and I asked whether she was Jewish as well, and my mom said she was not. I did not understand what was the difference between who was and who was not [Jewish].” On reflection, she elaborated, “I was brought up in a way that I did not know about my Jewish descent and I was confused about prečo som iná (why [and how] I am different).”

Most young Jews, however, found out about their family’s Jewish background only after the Velvet Revolution, when their parents felt that the socio-political situation was more tolerant, and that their children were old enough to realise what their Jewishness meant. Stela, a 36-year-old interpreter, was 13 when her father decided to tell her that she has Jewish roots on the paternal side of the family. Soon after the revolution, in 1990, her father sat her down and explained where the JCC was, saying that it was up to her whether she would like to go there. Looking back, she admitted, “He did not force me into anything. He gave me an opportunity to choose by saying, here is the information and you do whatever you want with it.” Reflecting on this experience, Stela rationalised her father’s timing in
sharing this startling information in terms of the Jewish minority’s political insecurity in the Socialist Czechoslovakia. “During Communism, I think, my father did not see it as safe to tell a child about Jewish roots. After the fall of Communism, with the opening of borders and people’s minds, he felt he could tell me about it all – about the family history.”

Stela’s father created a space for Stela to work out her emotions, her perceptions of her self and her sense of belonging in light of her mixed familial background – which, she felt, allowed her to accept and negotiate this new kinship and political knowledge. Over time, Stela’s knowledge of her background, and her experience of alienation, became important features of her understanding of herself.

The trend of keeping Jewishness secret until the ‘right’ time came, as I observed, was not affected by whether the child had only a Jewish mother or Jewish father, or came from an endogamous family. Although Samuel, a 36-year-old halakhic Jew, grew up with his Jewish maternal family, he was not aware of his Jewish descent until the age of 13. In his case, like Stela’s (who was non-halakhic), the change in his family’s perception of what this information would bring about was linked directly to the Velvet Revolution and socio-political change. Both Samuel and Stela were told about their Jewishness in 1990, when their parents felt it was safer to share this knowledge. “It came unexpectedly. In one moment, we knew who the Jews in town were. Before, we had no idea.” Samuel recalled that when he felt someone might be Jewish, he would ask his mother, who would often confirm his suspicion by saying, “Yes, they are as well.” She often knew the parents. “In the end, I found out one of my classmates was Jewish too, and a few years later I learned about the Jewish origin of another girl. But there are still people who pretend they are not Jews.”

While the secularising efforts of the Socialist state relegated religion to the private sphere, Jewishness was hidden for political reasons as well – some motivated by the politics of the previous regime and experiences of the Shoah, but sustained by anti-Jewish persecutions and the surveillance of Jewish families by the ŠtB (Secret Police, also called State Security; in Slovak Štátna bezpečnost). The rationales that figure in families’ decisions to disclose Jewishness to their children shed light on the entanglement of kinship with politics and religion (see also Pine 2007; Carsten
2007b; Lambek 2013a; Cannell 2013). Despite what Stela called an “opening of people’s minds” and what many perceived as a turn to greater tolerance, even after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, information about one’s Jewishness continues to be a sensitive sort of knowledge due to its kinship, religious, and political character.

Because of the persisting sense of political uncertainty and insecurity, many Jewish parents continued to employ a strategy of what I call ‘careful concealment,’ attempting to shield their children from knowledge about their Jewishness – even while partaking in Jewish social life.

For Alena, a 28-year-old lawyer from a Jewish family with a long endogamous history, knowledge of her Jewishness came with a simple object, which created a sense of urgency and ultimately motivated her mother to share a secret that the whole family was trying to leave unmentioned. In the spring of 1995, her mother decided to take Alena, then 10 years old, to a Purim carnival at the JCC. While for adults the carnival was an occasion to chat and enjoy a cup of coffee together, the children were all dressed up, playing games, dancing and singing. In one of those games, Alena won a children’s book about Jewish traditions, *Eight Lights* (1993) by Leo Pavlát. “I remember my mum immediately telling me ‘Do not read this now – leave it for later. I want to tell you something first, before you read this’.”

Soon after the carnival, her mother told Alena that their family is “a little bit different than others.” Setting the ‘otherness’ in a positive light and in terms of multiculturalism, Alena’s mother tried to demonstrate to her daughter the boundaries of the ‘safe space’ which one should not cross. While negotiating her own issues of insecurity and worries about what sharing this information with her child might do, Alena’s mother realised it was time. As Alena recalls, “Mum told me I am unique and I must not tell anyone. Not because it would be bad, but because others would want to be like me too and they cannot.”

Retrospectively, Alena claims, “Mum was afraid how I would react. Naturally that is the first thing – imagine she would tell me and I would think, ‘Ah well, I am Jewish, whatever.’ There is the whole history that becomes a part of you.” Alena describes the moment of winning the book and later being told that she was Jewish and her mother explaining what it means, as the point in time when she “truly
started to perceive [herself] as Jewish.” “That was the moment when I understood it all, and other things from my childhood started to make sense.”

While Alena lived in a Jewish environment without knowing about her family’s Jewish descent until she was 10, most people did not know about their Jewishness because their parents and grandparents had decided to avoid any associations with the Jewish minority – whether due to fear and a sense of insecurity, or to post-war disenchantment and losing faith in God after the Shoah – and tried to blend in with the majority. They left their Jewishness and the experiences it brought about unspoken.

The degree to which one can distance oneself from the Jewish community is evident in the story of Dorota’s father. Coming from an endogamous family highly affected by the Holocaust, he was brought up in an environment where Jewishness and the war were not mentioned. He married a non-Jewish woman, and kept his Jewish descent to himself. Dorota, a 29-year-old lawyer, was brought up in an atheistic spirit. Despite not knowing about her paternal family’s Jewish background, at age 15, she became fascinated by Judaism. “Somehow, on my own, I came to build a strong fascination with Judaism and my biggest dream was to visit a synagogue. But I had no idea how a non-Jew can go there.” Learning about Dorota’s desire, one of her mother’s friends offered to take her there. “She said that although she was not Jewish, she had some Jewish friends who could show it to us. I was ecstatic.” When her father realised the strength of Dorota’s interest, he decided to share his secret with her. “One day he sat me down and told me that we have Jewish roots, but that I should not really take it too seriously. ‘Just so that you would know.’ He said it to me simply as some ‘by-the-way’ information – but for me it was totally like ‘wow’.” Suddenly, Dorota felt that the sense of otherness she had had since childhood was explained. “I always looked different – you know I am darker anyway and when I was a child it was even more apparent.” This sense of ‘physical continuity’ materialised through the link to her newly discovered heritage, which offered a rationale for her own perceived otherness, is reminiscent of narratives of adult adoptees who discover their resemblance to their birth parents (Carsten 2000c). For Dorota’s father, however, sharing this information was the most he was willing
to do. “Until this day I do not know anything about his family,” she admitted; “I will see whether I ever learn something about the family’s past.”

As they gradually uncovered their family’s secrets, many Slovak Jews began to put pieces of the mosaic of their life together, learning about their own ancestors and familial experiences and memories. Whether their Jewishness was presented to them as unsafe knowledge (Klara), in the form of ‘by-the-way’ information (Dorota), or in positive terms of being ‘unique’ (Alena), people needed to navigate this new knowledge that transformed their perception of their selves and their sense of belonging. I turn to these modes of navigation next.

**Learning to navigate the knowledge of Jewishness**

All these stories of discovering one’s Jewish roots highlight the relation between knowledge and personhood, through the confusion that learning such information produced. For many, this confusion arose with the realisation that one is someone else – an ‘other’ – and that this otherness was kept secret by their parents and grandparents due to negative memories, fear and a persistent sense of insecurity. Suddenly, these young people realised that they were not who they thought they were. Acquiring this information, for many, triggered a process of distancing, creating a sense of what I describe as ‘un-belonging’. While they no longer felt that they entirely belonged where they used to, they found themselves at a point of transition in which they did not yet fit in with the Jewish community either (see for example Turner 1986[1967]; van Gennep 1960[1909]). ‘Becoming Jewish’ started with learning about their Jewishness, and, for many, was accelerated by exploring what it entails and means to be Jewish. It was clear, however, that the information about their Jewishness changed young Jews’ perception of who they were almost instantly. They talked about it as “finding out where one comes from.”

Young Jews expressed this process of discovery in the present tense – unlike the adult adoptees profiled by Carsten, who shared the project of discovering their roots but understood it in terms of learning about where they ‘came’ from (2007c: 407; see also Carsten 2000c). This choice of tense among young Jews highlighted the
direct, powerful impact of the process of discovery on their present lives, and showed how finding out about their Jewishness changed the way they perceived themselves and their relationships to others. Learning this information, for young Jews, has a constitutive power over the present, but it simultaneously changes their perception of the past and imagined future (as explored in later chapters). Although the main effect is in the ‘now’, the acquired knowledge creates a link to the past, often reaching across generations, influencing young Jews’ identification with their newly discovered Jewishness in light of their families’ experiences and memories of the Shoah. This shift of their allegiance, in respect of the political and historical context, creates a need to renegotiate categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’, separating young Jews from their non-Jewish friends and acquaintances.

These sentiments of otherness were reinforced by the advice young Jews were given upon learning about their Jewishness – the advice not to share the knowledge of their Jewishness with anyone. Surrounded by feelings of fear and insecurity, the discovered family secret required them to negotiate not only the fact that such information was hidden from them by their own kin, but also to navigate what parents described to their teenage children as a dangerous and powerful piece of information that can cause discrimination.

“My mum told me straight away that this is not something to shout about in public and that it is a matter of only the community and the close family.” Dagmar explained to me how her mother, who herself was taught to keep her Jewishness secret, told her that she must not tell anyone about it. “I was always very careful not to reveal or tell something in front of someone external – someone from the outside – very cautious that no words would give me away. I took this thing ‘not to tell anyone’ very seriously.” Experiencing a sense of otherness and feeling alienated by this knowledge from her peers, Dagmar was afraid that if her friends found out about her being Jewish, it would have a negative effect on their friendship. “In the last year of primary school, I was confronted with antisemitism. I think they did not know about me [being Jewish], but one classmate called me ‘you Židka’. We were standing in a line for lunch, maybe she did not like something I did, and she called me not ‘a Jew’ but ‘you Židka’ [mis-pronouncing the feminine term for a Jew in Slovak, Židovka],” Dagmar described this incident with stress in her voice. “I got scared and
blushed, but then another classmate defended me and said, ‘But Dagmar is not!’ They started to argue whether I am or not. And I said: ‘Of course I am not!’” While Dagmar was embarrassed to admit she lied about not being Jewish, it was the only way she could imagine navigating her Jewishness in public – pretending it was not real.

Despite many young Jews not being told about their Jewishness until they somehow figured it out on their own or were told by someone non-Jewish, there were a few exceptions who knew from an early age and were told to be proud of their Jewishness. No matter how or when they found out about their Jewish descent, however, all young Jews were urged by their parents and grandparents to keep the information about their otherness private, highlighting the persistent sense of insecurity. For all young Jews – both those who found out later in life and those who were raised with this knowledge – Jewishness was presented as something that produces negative reactions from the wider public, and as potentially dangerous information that should be handled with care. Although Teodor, a 35-year-old halakhic Jew, comes from a family where Jewishness was never hidden from him, it was saturated with feelings of insecurity and otherness. Advised to tell no one, he admitted to me, “I have been scared all my life whether someone will find out about it.” Worrying and being careful what he says in public, Teodor always perceived his Jewishness as “a handicap.” He felt Jewish descent alienated him from his non-Jewish friends and colleagues, and feared that his difference becoming visible would be detrimental to his relationships.

“Jewishness was always present in my life,” Barbora, a 34-year-old halakhic mother of two, explained to me. “While we were taught that it is a part of who we are, and we should be proud of that, we were reminded that we should not talk about it outside of the home.” Barbora grew up in an endogamous family that celebrated all major Jewish holidays. While their lives were oriented around the Jewish calendar, she recalls that Jewishness was still surrounded with feelings of insecurity and worries that someone would find out. Remembering how her family used to attend services on Yom Kippur, she noted that “because we were certain that the ŠtB was observing everything, we used to pretend to go for a visit to one Jewish family, and through their backyard we walked to the prayer room moved from the synagogue to a
house behind theirs.” Growing up, having the issues of visibility and insecurity on her mind, Barbora – like Teodor – was very careful not to make her Jewishness known.

Despite the political revolution of 1989, the young generation of Jews was still raised to be careful and hide their Jewishness in public. This carefulness was engendered by the political character of this knowledge and the uncertainty of its possible consequences. Recognising the power it has had over their self-perception, young Jews, like Dagmar and Barbora, worried what learning such information might do to their relationships – whether friendships, or, later in life, romantic, collegial and neighbourly relationships (see Chapters Three and Four). While kinship knowledge can create relationships (see Strathern 1999), strategies chosen by Slovak Jews show that denying particular knowledge by keeping it secret may be productive in maintaining (or preserving) relationships that might otherwise be endangered by that very knowledge. Contrasting the secrets their older kin kept from them and the secrets they are keeping from non-Jewish others, young Jews saw secrecy as necessary (see Simmel 1906; Jones 2014).

The efforts to keep their Jewish descent secret from their friends and classmates, however, for some people – like Stela and Alena – resulted in an interesting twist. When they began to be more active in the Jewish community – for instance, in the SUJY, which I discuss below – young Jews realised that many of the friends they grew up with, as well as their family acquaintances, were Jewish as well. “All the kids I played with I later met in the SUJY,” Stela explained, “we grew up together, and we did not know this about each other.” Retrospectively, many young Jews rationalised that Bratislava is small, and that “older people know who has some Jewish ancestors and how people were named before the war.” Their grandparents had Jewish friends with whom they played cards, their parents had friends with whom they organised common trips; and, therefore, even some young Jews grew up within a social space that included other Jews. They played with other Jewish children, not knowing what they shared together. Stela reasoned that “they felt close, I think, because they were the same – they were all Jewish.”

Because of the advice young Jews were given by their parents not to talk about their Jewishness outside of home or ‘Jewish context’, many found out that
there are two ways to knowing about Jewishness – acquiring the knowledge of one’s own Jewishness, and knowing about the Jewishness of others. The special character of this political and kinship knowledge, surrounded by notions of uncertainty and insecurity, affected the flow of information – when and how it was shared, with whom, and how it was perceived.

**Bringing up a new generation**

“What you know can never be stolen from you.”

– a Jewish father on the role of education

**Transmission through concealment: Raising a certain type of person**

Although a family’s Jewishness was often silenced and hidden, there were still aspects of Jewish heritage that permeated the way young Slovak Jews were brought up. Many parents tried to transmit certain set of values to their children, often the same ones they were taught by their own parents. Apart from being brought up to be ethical and moral people, there were several other values that were emphasised: responsibility, independence and preparedness – which was associated with saving money, valuing education and experiences, travelling, sport, and the ability to speak several languages.

Growing up, Alena remembers that among the most important things her parents taught her were responsibility and readiness. “I received Jewishness in my everyday upbringing. For instance, I learned that it is necessary to save money because you never know what will happen, when you might need something,” Alena explained, adding, “the older I was, the more I saw the connection to pogroms and the migration of Jews around the world. Every time when they settled down somewhere and some problem arose, they were blamed for it and had to be ready to leave.” She recalled her father teaching her to “value money,” saying, “Do not spend everything you earn or you are given, always put some part away, you never know
when you will need it.” The same thoughts, as she remembers, were articulated by her grandmother. “Every week, when we went to visit her, she would give us some pocket money and say ‘put this aside or buy something for yourself.’ But we understood that she wanted us to save the money and create some budget that we would be able to operate with.” Reflecting on why it was important for them, Alena argued, “I think that it is very much related to Jewishness because we were always trying to create some reserves.” Her parents, moreover, taught her to “do something more – not to be satisfied with only what you have, everything that you learn can be useful one day.”

This ‘something more’ underpinned the value conferred upon education in the upbringing of young Jews, much as it did for their parents and grandparents. The sentence, “What you know can never be stolen from you” frequently reappeared during my fieldwork, articulating what was clear to anyone within the community – education is crucial for a good life. In Alena’s family, as in many others, finishing high school was not perceived as “enough.” A university degree, in most families, represented a socially acceptable achievement. “They always drove me to do something more for myself, saying, ‘you never know when it might come in useful’.”

Young Jews’ upbringing was, however, also affected by Socialism and the secularising efforts of the state that tried to limit religion or at best relocate it to the private sphere. As Samuel explained, “I grew up atheist, not knowing I was Jewish. The communists closed the synagogues. Either demolished them or rebuilt them to serve another purpose.” Recalling his own childhood, he claimed that “there was nothing in our upbringing – no Jewishness, no Christianity.” Samuel was brought up to value the possibilities of education and “practical things – such as travelling, sport, languages. It was never related to any religion.” For him, the upbringing he got was to appreciate the sorts of experience and knowledge that help one lead a ‘successful life’.

Like Samuel and Alena, many grew up being taught a lesson that Alena’s father articulated as: “you are responsible for yourself and your parents are here for you, they are your support, but ultimately it will be just you. You need to be able to stand on your own two feet.” This emphasis on independence and responsibility implicitly reflected the post-war generation’s recognition of risk, and their
experiences of the past and of extensive familial losses. Thus, though many young Jews were brought up without learning about Judaism or the history of the war, the values their parents imparted – around education, saving money, and being “responsible towards life” – were informed by both. Although most of these ideas may be shared among wider Slovak society, after learning of their Jewishness, young Jews recognised the values their parents and grandparents transmitted to them as being essentially Jewish. Their efforts to create these links highlight their need for a sense of continuity in the context of the rupture that learning about the family secret produced. The Jewishness of their families before the moment of discovery, however, was for many invisible.

Invisibility of familial Jewishness

“In only by name you cannot really tell who’s standing in front of you now.”

– Alena on uncertainties of recognition

Changing surnames: Names veiling ‘otherness’

After the Second World War, Jewish survivors who decided to return and rebuild their lives in Slovakia faced various struggles. Afraid of continuing discrimination, and trying to find ways to start a new life in which their Jewishness would not be visible to all (contrary to the war years when the yellow ‘Jewish star’ sewed to their clothes revealed this information publically), many Jews – as individuals but also whole families – decided to change their surnames by way of reinventing themselves. Elina, an 85-year-old Shoah survivor, and her husband changed their surname in the early 1950s, when she was pregnant with their first child. They saw the situation as the right time to “start anew,” encouraged by other Jews who were also changing their names.

Jewish people living in the region of the present Slovak Republic were compelled to take on what many Shoah survivors considered German surnames, during the ‘emancipation process’ that started with laws accepted by Emperor Joseph II in 1782 and later in 1787 (see Salner 2008). This “legislative imposition of
permanent surnames,” according to James C. Scott (1998: 71), was a deliberate effort of the state to enhance its power through standardisation and making its citizens legible (see also Lambek 2013a). “The invention of permanent, inherited patronyms” was a means of “fixing an individual’s identity and linking him or her to a kin group” (Scott 1998: 65). What is missing from Scott’s account is the reflection that although it may seem that “people belong to a name rather than the reverse” (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006: 7), persons can find ways to take control over this legibility, to a certain extent, using it to conceal their identity by changing their name.

After the Shoah, some survivors did not want to bear their German surnames anymore. As Milena noted, “the name we had was imposed on us and it was German, you know, after the war my father said he could not have it anymore. With my mum, they tried to invent a new name that would be not too long and would be more neutral.” A number of people also argued that they felt Slovak, and thus preferred to have a Slovak over a German name (see also Salner 2008). Although these reasons were often the ones that appeared on official documents requesting the alterations, changing one’s surname was also motivated by a continuing sense of insecurity.

Many people decided to take on a different name, hoping it would veil their past and create a new beginning free of possible discrimination based on having a distinctively ‘Jewish’ surname. There were different practices involved in choosing a name. Some people translated their surnames into the Slovak language literally, keeping their meaning. ‘Stein’ was turned into ‘Kamenný’ (translates as stony or made of stone), and surnames depicting various animals emerged. Others created new surnames by keeping part of their original ones (usually the first syllable) and adding some syllables to make them look more Slovak, or by choosing unrelated Slovak surnames. It was important, for people like Elina, that the name would “sound and look purely Slovak,” enabling them to blend in and pass as Slovaks.

The function of these new names was to protect their bearers by concealing a painful past and risky association with Jewish descent. Much as the Yemeni women studied by Gabriele vom Bruck took on male names, which generated “a sort of protective layer, allowing them to operate in otherwise forbidden contexts” (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006: 9; see also vom Bruck 2006), Slovak Jews changed their surnames in an effort to avoid discrimination, creating new social
spaces where they could work and live without standing out as different. Names, like masks, enabled them to change how they were seen, as well as how they related to each other, and to other Slovaks.

In order to change their surnames, people had to send an official written request to the regional bureau, stating the reason for this proposed change and suggesting the name they would like to adopt instead. After consideration at the bureau in Bratislava, Milena’s father received a letter saying, “On the basis of the decree clause 1 paragraph 8 of the law number 31/1942 […] I thereby allow you to change your surname from [X] to [Y].”20 The document further stated who else would be affected by this change – in this case, Milena, 17 at the time of the request (in 1946), and her mother. Upon permitting the change, in spring of 1947, the bureau let the respective registry office and “other evidences” know about this alteration. Once the changes were made and recorded, the family received documents with their new names.

Interestingly, paragraph 1 of the decree number 165/1945 stated that “requests of Czechoslovak state citizens for permission to change non-Slavic or non-Slavic sounding name[s] to Slavic one[s] are subject to only a stamp fee of 5KCS (Czechoslovak Crown) per every sheet.” For allowing such change, the state decided not to set a fee for any office work surrounding the act from 11th December 1945 to 31st December 1946. This decree’s validity was later extended to cover requests submitted within the period between 1st January 1947 and 31st December 1949 (see decree number 165/1947). The state’s gesture of waiving the extra costs can be interpreted as a sign of recognising the troubled past of the Second World War, and the position of the Slovak State. The lived experiences of later decades, however, also showed that the state – through considering, allowing and registering the alterations – kept records of these changes and thus, as some documents of the ŠtB demonstrated, enabled Secret Police to ‘map’ Jewish families (see Bumová 2006a; Heitlinger 2006).

As the distinctiveness of ‘Jewish’ surnames in many families disappeared, many young Jews – and many other Slovaks from their surroundings – could not tell that their family was Jewish. When Klara was attending high school, already aware

20 Milena copied the official document her parents received, detailing its information, for me.
of her Jewish descent, she recalled an incident when her teacher of Slovak language and literature complimented her on her surname, highlighting its Slovakness. “I still remember clearly how enthusiastic she was about my name, saying ‘what a beautiful and euphonious Slovak surname you have!’, and I was just telling to myself, ‘ah, if only you knew my real name!'” Klara’s grandparents on both sides had decided to change their surnames after the war: one side from Kohn to Konárík, the other from Levy to Leknový.

Because of the way they happened, these changes of surname, brought about an interesting map of ‘artificial’ kinship. People with different Jewish surnames would choose the same surname – the Levys might choose Leknový, but the Sonnenfelds might choose Leknový as well. Klara, when introducing herself to people, would often remark, “but I am not related to those – we are not family,” making the missing kinship link suggested by the shared surname clear. There were also many people who had previously shared a surname but employed different strategies when deciding whether to keep their original name or make changes. Sometimes even close relatives would choose different new surnames, thus losing – or hiding – the most publicly-identifiable connection among members of kin. “There were many people with the surname Kohn, but we do not know anyone who would change it to Konárík as we did,” Klara said. Reflecting on this issue, and recalling how she learned from her classmate that she was Jewish, she admitted, “I still do not know how people can know about someone’s Jewishness if they have changed their names.”

There were, however, also families that kept their distinctively Jewish surnames. Descendants from these families, such as Alena, saw this decision as a matter of pride and dignity. “I am proud of my surname and the heritage it represents. I was never ashamed of it, and neither were my grandparents.”21 While sharing Alena’s sentiments of pride, Filip, a student in his early twenties, articulated to me his realisation that “with such a clearly Jewish surname [like his], one could never be elected to any political post. People would not do it.” He highlighted the

---

21 Bearing the family name – as a marker of her Jewishness and familial heritage, highlighting where she comes from – is important for Alena to the extent that she decided to keep her maiden name upon marriage. While in Slovakia the common practice is to take a husband’s surname, she accepted the surname of her non-Jewish husband and kept her Jewish family name too.
still-present sense of discrimination based on a perceived ‘Jewish-specific’ otherness.22

Although having changed one’s surname is now seen as something of a mark of shame by those whose families resisted and kept their Jewish surnames, it was a strategy that many people chose because it enabled them to deal with painful memories and legitimate concerns about potential discrimination. However, even if names were changed, many survivors came home with a more physical and indelible reminder of what they had been through – a tattoo of their concentration camp serial number.

**Hiding the tattoo: Grandparents finding ways to conceal their Jewishness**

While many might not know what this tattoo is, for people who have one, it is a constant reminder of dehumanisation, loss and otherness – a mark of difference that many tried to hide from the sight of their descendants and others. “When I was a child, I remember wondering what my granny had on her arm. I had no idea what it was,” Dagmar recalled. During the winter months her paternal grandmother wore long sleeves, but when the warmer weather arrived, she would routinely place a plaster over the number tattooed on her forearm, making it invisible for anyone to see. Noticing this habit, Dagmar started to question what she was covering. “Whenever I asked why she put a plaster on her arm, she just replied that she had injured herself. She did not want me to know.”

Max, an 18-year-old student who discovered his Jewishness only a couple of years prior to my fieldwork, had a similar experience to Dagmar’s and many others. “When I was a small boy, I used to wonder what my great-grandmother had on her arm. When I asked, she just said she and her friend got those tattoos together as a sign of protest when they were young – that it was a silly thing they did for fun.” Years later, he asked his grandmother about it. After his questions were dismissed multiple times, two years ago she eventually told him the truth. “She was the one who told me that her mother got that tattoo in Auschwitz.” The information that

---

22 For names revealing difference in the context of Turkey see Marcy Brink-Danan (2010, 2012).
followed brought about more questions, and Max confessed to me, “I wish I had not asked.”

For Dagmar, this process of acquiring knowledge also took some time. It was only years later, when Dagmar found out about her family’s Jewishness, that she started to ask more direct questions. For her, the confusion arose because her maternal grandmother, who was deported to a concentration camp only in 1944, did not have a tattoo to hide. “I could not understand why one had it and the other did not.” Although she asked frequently, answers never came. “She would always say, ‘I will tell you later, when you are older.’ But she did not manage to tell me anything in the end. She did not want to talk about it at all.” This tattoo became an embodied memory – a non-narrative remnant of the painful past, a constant reminder of the void that was left after the dehumanising catastrophe of the Holocaust – which signified the ‘presence of the past’, however silent, in the everyday lives of Jewish families (see also Kidron 2009: 7, 2012; Fischer 2015).

The silence of the everyday

After the war, most survivors wanted to forget what they went through. While there were people who talked about their Jewishness and their war experiences, the majority of survivors wanted to start a new life, and silence was often the strategy they chose. Survivors often tried to shelter their own children from “learning about this too soon” – though their children, the post-war generation, claimed that growing up, they felt the presence of the painful past regardless (see also Kidron 2009).

Dorota’s Jewish grandparents decided not to talk about the Shoah or their Jewishness to their families at all. “It was undesirable. They made it a secret and worked so much on hiding it that they became very scared if anyone would find out. I think that also did not help them to cope with what they went through. They kept it all inside.” She noted sadly that she did not even know how her grandparents actually survived the war, or how they had lived before it began. “They baptised my father, and I was brought up not knowing anything.”

Most survivors and their children chose the strategy not only of silencing negative familial experiences and memories of the Holocaust, of hiding, and of being Jewish, but also of trying to adapt to the lifestyle of their neighbours. After the
Second World War, Klara’s maternal and paternal grandparents decided to do whatever it would take to blend in with the majority. Her mother was baptised as a Protestant Christian, and her father as a Catholic. “They were not raised Christian, but their parents had them baptised just in case.” As Klara recalled, all her grandparents wanted to conceal their Jewishness. It was a secret they wanted to keep – even from their own kin.

Growing up, Klara lived in a household in which no one spoke of Jewishness. For 15 years, she did not know of her Jewish origin. “As a kid, I used to come home telling my parents and my grandmother, who then already lived with us after opapa’s (grandfather’s) death, some insulting jokes about Jews that I had learned at school,” she confessed. “All they did was hush me saying, ‘Do not say things like these.’ But they never told me, ‘Do not speak like that – you are Jewish yourself’.” Not knowing why she should not tell the jokes her classmates enjoyed, and she herself found funny, Klara admitted feeling a certain discomfort arising from these jokes, “as if already then I somehow felt it inside.”

Efforts to hide Jewishness transcended what was silenced, and were also materialised in everyday behaviour and practice. “I have a clear memory of my grandmother sitting at a kitchen table, holding a razor-blade and scraping Hebrew letters off of pencils her sister sent us, among other stuff, from Israel.” Sharing this memory with me, Klara explained, “She did not want my classmates to see.

---

23 Baptism – whether Protestant or Catholic – was not uncommon among Jews. Some people employed this strategy during the war, hoping that a certificate of christening would help them to avoid deportations. While it was not entirely effective during the war, many Holocaust survivors perceived the possibility of having their children baptised as a way to enhance the appearance of their ‘non-otherness’, and a means of blending in. It is mostly the post-war generation of children that was baptised. This strategy was much less evident when the post-war generation had their own children – today’s young Jews – as the Socialist regime looked down upon religious practices. During Socialism, Christian parents did not always baptise their children, and those who wanted to often organised the ritual secretly.

24 They all wished to be cremated and buried at the general town cemetery, despite the fact that her paternal great-grandparents and the rest of the family were buried at the Neolog Jewish cemetery in Bratislava. Klara admitted that the family had not yet pondered the idea of having their urns moved to the Neolog cemetery, although some people did recently, as the JRC made space for an urn field in the far corner of the cemetery (see Salner 2014). While identity in some societies, according to Lambek (2013: 254; see also Course 2007), becomes “fixed by the mode and place of burial,” here we can see how negotiable it still may appear. At least in terms of its visibility. It was the fact that the grandparents wanted to be cremated and buried at a non-Jewish cemetery in a desire to keep their Jewishness veiled, that still holds Klara’s parents from moving their ashes to a Jewish cemetery. The place of a burial and its inconclusiveness – via a possibility to move the remains of a deceased – shows that in this particular context the process of ‘fixing’ one’s identity – or its visibility – does not end with a burial.
Although I do not think that anyone would know to associate those letters with Jewishness. She still had that fear in her and did not want anyone to know.” Klara recalled how things started to make sense after she found out about her family’s Jewishness (see also Kidron 2009).

Her grandmother and parents did not celebrate any Jewish holidays, but “omama (grandmother) had a habit, that every year around Easter [on Pesach] she would go to this house, known as the Kitchen, where Mrs Katz would give her maces. I used to go with her, but I had no idea what it was and why she went there.” As it was never explained, “I thought that she was selling something that could be bought only there. That was it for me.” While not observing any dietary restrictions, for Klara’s grandmother buying maces once a year became a symbolic gesture keeping her close to the spirit she was raised in. “At this time of year, I remember, in the evenings, she would sit down with my parents and have a cup of coffee while savouring the maces. But I did not know the meaning until years after.”

Similarly, when looking back at her childhood, Stela saw many little things that started to make sense only in retrospect. After surviving the war, her grandmother decided to undergo a baptism herself, and married a non-Jewish man. “She completely negated her Jewishness and repressed everything that would remind her of it,” Stela explained. “The Holocaust was an absolute taboo. No one spoke about it.” At moments when the whole family would be sitting in their living room watching television, and a documentary or a film related to the Second World War or the Shoah appeared, “it was immediately turned off, without any words. I did not know why, but then it all became clear. It is still a very sensitive issue whenever I hear about it.”

Many young Jews share similar experiences, depending on how much they were told, how early in their life, and how their families reacted to them finding out. But looking back on their childhood retrospectively after learning about their Jewishness, they all tried to understand why such important information was hidden from them. Most would articulate their reasoning, in a manner similar to Klara, that “at home no one ever talked about Judaism. After Fascism we had Socialism that made it a taboo anyway. Maybe that is why they did not tell us.”
Recalling many antisemitic reactions during the Socialist era and after the political revolution – especially among her colleagues – Klara’s mother, Veronika, explained to me that every time she heard someone say something bad about Jews, she would be reminded that it was not something to share with people. “One day at work, a few years ago, I heard a colleague gossiping about some Jewish woman’s abortion, and my other colleague reacted ‘At least there is one less Jew!’” Being aware of these attitudes towards the Jewish minority, Klara’s parents decided they would keep their Jewishness secret – from their colleagues and the public, but also from their own children. “We thought it was better if they did not know. It makes it easier, you know.” Justifying this choice, Veronika claimed, “If you hear all these antisemitic, inhumane comments, the blood freezes in your body. It is really better if they do not know anything about you.” For these reasons, feeding their sense of insecurity and perceived need for carefulness, Klara’s parents tried to incorporate non-Jewish traditions into their life. “We did not live a Jewish life, we lived normally as others – simply as common normal people.” Veronika confessed, “I liked it better that way.”

The ‘Jewish Christmas’

One of the customs that many Jewish families incorporated into their lives was celebrating Christmas. Many parents, like Klara’s mother, articulated to me their desire of not wanting their children to feel different. “We had the Christmas tree and we did all those Christian traditions. We wanted our daughters to feel the same as others.” Klara’s memories of winter holidays are filled with joy and happiness, remembering how her grandmother would dress up as Mikuláš (Saint Nicholas) and bring them sweets, how they would decorate the Christmas tree, the cookies her mother would bake, and all the gifts under the tree. “We loved the Saint Nicholas day and Christmas. We did not even know that something like Hanukah exists. We did not even have a menorah or anything like that – but a Christmas tree was a must.” Similarly, Dagmar remembers how her mother would cook Slovakian Christmas dishes typical for the region she came from, such as fish soup, fried fish and potato salad, and the whole family – all Jewish – would meet under a Christmas tree to share a “nice proper Christmas dinner” and exchange gifts.
While parents often explained their motivations for celebrating Christmas and having a Christmas tree by saying “it is a nice holiday”, and by arguing that they wanted their children to feel the same as their friends, it also involved making their own ‘sameness’ – or rather ‘non-otherness’ – evident. Many people grew up in households where their parents would decorate a tree and place it directly in the window for passers-by to see. While this practice was common during Socialism, many households continued the tradition after 1989 as well. Some young Jews and their parents noted that having a Christmas tree also played a camouflaging role, hiding their Jewishness from their friends, neighbours and other visitors. “When I was growing up, not that it has changed much, there were no Jews, and those who were Jewish were pretending to be non-Jewish,” Samuel explained. “Everyone had a Christmas tree in a visible place. People were afraid that neighbours would tell on them that they were Jewish. We had the tree, but no other Christian traditions.”

Exploring the motivations of Jewish parents in their practices of ‘careful concealment’ demonstrates their persistent concerns about Jewishness as an unsafe knowledge. The employment of strategies of silence and hiding was a means of providing their family with care and protection. For young Jews, learning about their Jewish origin created confusion, and a need to make sense of the reasons this family secret was kept hidden for so many years. It was this ‘discrepancy’ in their life’s storyline that did not make sense, and usually brought about a desire to discover more.

**Discovering Jewishness**

Many young Jews found the new information about their Jewishness to be life-changing. For Alena, learning about her family’s Jewishness brought about a change in the lifestyle of the whole family. When her mother explained to her that she was not like her other classmates and friends, Alena insisted she would like to do more of “what Jews do”. Discovering that Christmas is a Christian holiday, she told her parents that they should no longer celebrate it. They did not decorate a tree or have
gifts anymore; instead, they started to light candles on Hanukah. “My brother, to this
day, jokes that he had four years of Christmas gifts less than me, only because I said
I do not want to have Christmas anymore.”

The transition was rapid, and, as Alena recalled, the person who found it most
difficult was her mother. In the absence of a Christmas tree, which used to decorate
their living room, Alena’s mother stopped inviting friends who did not know about
their Jewishness for visits over the holidays. “She was scared, and told us we must
not tell at school that we do not celebrate Christmas, and of course that we are
Jewish.” While this turn towards discovering her Jewish heritage brought Alena
closer to who she felt she was, it created a need for her mother to re-learn how to
negotiate the Jewishness of her family and guard their secret across the boundary of
the ‘safe space’, from non-Jewish friends, colleagues and neighbours. Although
Alena did not then understand why she should worry about such things, later she
realised the political realities of Jewishness. “I noticed that being Jewish is not a very
popular thing. When I started to comprehend the connections in the history – the war,
who caused it and what happened – I understood that the relationship towards Jews is
not very good. There is antisemitism and always will be.”

With time, Alena started to realise the little things her family did that made
her feel different. “I remember that my granny used to play the songs of some Israeli
singer she liked, at their house they even had separate cutlery. They did not eat meat
with milk, and she made seder. That was the house where I felt Jewish,” she said,
adding, “I did not need to study anything – it was just there as if in the air. Simple.
Unforced.” Since finding out about her Jewishness, she has not yet felt that she
would like to learn more than she experienced at home. “I am proud of my
Jewishness and the heritage of my ancestors, I was never ashamed of it. But I do not
want to read books about it.”

People find their own ways and times to search for more information. While
Alena felt Jewish and did not experience any particular need to learn more, or to look
for knowledge outside of the home, many people – especially those who did not have
an opportunity to learn from their relatives – tried to search elsewhere for clues about
what it means to be Jewish. When, in the early 1990s, Lucka felt it was safe to search
for information, she decided to learn more about Jewishness so she could teach her
already teenage children about it. “My mother hardly ever spoke about anything Jewish and my dad not at all. So I did not know anything,” she said. On one holiday, she came across the film *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). “Through this film, we discovered what it meant to be Jewish. We talked about it. It was like our school. This film became our lexicon.” As the Second World War, and then also Socialism, interrupted the transmission of knowledge – through loss followed with silence and concealment – people who wanted to know more often had to find alternative sources of information. Watching this film over and over was, for Lucka and her children, a way of learning what her parents did not want to talk about.

The route from finding out about one’s Jewish roots to discovering Jewishness and learning more about it is not, however, a fast and direct process for all people. Some, such as Klara, did not know much about Jewishness, but did not search out more information until a later age. Despite the radical effect this kinship and political knowledge had on their perceptions of themselves and their relationships to others, people often needed time or an additional trigger to motivate them to actively pursue their family’s past, Judaism and Jewishness as such. When Klara found out about her family’s Jewish descent, she was 15 years old; but it was not until nearly 16 years later that she started to look for more information. The curiosity of her older sister Berenika was one incentive, later enhanced by her desire to make *aliyah* (immigration to Israel). “I knew I was Jewish, but I did not have any sense of what it entails. As we did not live like that, I could not even imagine what it meant,” Klara explained. Before what she described as her “Jewish awakening,” she said, “I just felt like I should really not talk about it with anyone, because people may see it as something negative. It felt like it was a part of me, but at the same time, like a private thing.” Klara’s attitude towards Jewishness was highly affected by her upbringing and the sense of insecurity that her parents transmitted through their strategies of ‘careful concealment’.

The change that influenced Klara’s, and to an extent her parents’, relationship to Jewishness came in 2010 – when Berenika, at the end of a long-term relationship, started to learn Hebrew and decided to move to Israel. Although her parents were not content with her decision, they saw that she had made up her mind. “We realised we
just needed to be happy that she’s happy,” her mother explained. When she applied for her aliya, however, Berenika realised the power of documents. Her grandparents’ choice to baptise their children in order to protect them from discrimination – which meant that both her parents were listed as Christian on their birth certificates – created difficulties in proving that she was eligible for the programme according to the Law of Return. Even though the birth certificates of her grandparents clearly stated ‘Israelites’ on them, bearing the remaining mark of ‘otherness’, her application faced difficulties. New birth certificates without indication of religion were issued to her parents, and, to support her application, the family became members of the JRC. Berenika also took photographs of her great-grandparents’ tombstones in the Jewish cemetery to prove that the family was Jewish; and with a letter from the rabbi, she was eventually accepted, moved and started her new life in Israel.

Soon after her sister emigrated, Klara started to attend Hebrew classes and gradually immersed herself in the Jewish community. Although her parents still only rarely take part in community events – as her father explained to me, “it is not good to group together, as it contributes to antisemitism and xenophobia” – for Klara it became important to learn more about the heritage of her ancestors and to understand her sister’s new world. In the course of my fieldwork, I watched Klara become more active and engaged on various platforms in the community – from short and self-conscious appearances at communal events, through joining the SUJY, to attending synagogue services and the rabbi’s lectures. From our first meeting, we started to explore Jewish life in Bratislava together – she as an insider, and me as a curious outsider. Gradually, she became more interested and felt more comfortable in the community context. At the same time, Klara’s family still celebrates Christmas at home, and Jewishness is still kept private.

On the other end of the spectrum, there were people for whom discovering their Jewishness was connected to making a faster and larger ‘leap’ – which often displeased their older kin. “I was just a normal boy, you know, I did not really care,” Maros, a 26-year-old student living abroad, explained. “I grew up in a secular household, as do most Jews here, we had Christmas and everything. If we visited the
synagogue once in four years that was a success.” The shift in his life was brought about by a meeting with Rabbi Myers. “Prišiel som k tomu ako slepě kura k zrnu,” he said – I came to it as a blind chicken to corn (a Slovak saying that highlights the chance of acquiring something without any conscious intent). “One summer I met the rabbi and he asked whether I was Jewish. As both my parents were, I said yes. He said, if I wanted, he could teach me about Judaism. Since I had school holidays, I agreed, and here I am.” He made his point sitting opposite to me, dressed in a white shirt and black suit, with tzitzit (knotted ritual tassels) hanging by his hips, and short payot (sidelocks) appearing from behind his ears, by the corner of his hat. The change that occurred in his life was undeniably visible.

The constitutive power of acquiring this kinship and political knowledge is equally apparent in Lea’s story. Having grown up a devout Christian, undergoing Catholic confirmation and even attending Catholic schools, when she learned about her Jewishness, this information radically affected her perception of herself. Until her late teens, Lea and her family lived what she described as “a Christian life.” “I was a proper Christian. With faith and everything.” Although she had always known that her maternal grandmother was Jewish, Lea felt her whole life Christian. It was only after she learned about the rules of Halakhah, which say that a person is Jewish if her or his mother is Jewish, that she drastically changed how she saw herself, who she felt she was and wanted to become.

Lea developed a strong interest in Judaism, and started to attend classes for converts. Within a few months, Lea visited Israel on a taglit (discovery) trip and sochnut (short for Jewish Agency for Israel) study programme. “I sent an application, they accepted me, and suddenly I was in Israel. That was something incredible – I fell in love with that country.” Returning home, she realised she did not want to continue her undergraduate studies, and felt a desire to learn more about Judaism instead. “Announcing that at home was difficult,” she noted. Although her parents wanted her to return to university, Lea decided to enrol in a girls’ Orthodox midrasha (Jewish studies institute for women) school in Germany. “All girls there were the same, coming with a minimal knowledge about Judaism.” After two months, she

Recalling how her non-Jewish father was pleased with her decisions and choices, she realised her mother never felt comfortable attending church. “The only time she went was when my dad asked her to marry him in front of God, that was already after the revolution... She did it for him.”
“found what [she] was looking for.” “I discovered the philosophy I liked. I felt like I belonged there. So, when I reached that peace of mind, I decided to leave, I felt like it was time to return to university.” Attending the Lauder Business School in Vienna, which she called “the only Jewish university in Central Europe,” Lea realised that Jewishness can take many forms. “Coming from the very Orthodox environment of the midrasha, I did not know there were more ways of being Jewish.” Finding herself wearing only skirts and avoiding handshakes, she started to reconsider her identification with Jewishness. Exploring different layers of Jewish Orthodox but also Liberal life, she found her own way of being Jewish, married a Jewish man, and is now raising her children in the Jewish tradition.

Lea was one of the young Jews who, upon finding out about their Jewishness, underwent the biggest change. While her route to discovering Jewishness went through Israel and the midrasha, other young Jews found their own ways to explore how they felt about their Jewishness and the heritage of their ancestors. Some, such as Dagmar and Eliska, were enrolled by their parents in a Jewish summer camp in Szarvas, where they formed life-long friendships and learned more about Judaism than their parents knew. Most parents, however, did not consider this undertaking safe, or did not want their children to explore their Jewishness at all – meaning their children had to find their own ways to discovery. While Klara’s mother noted that she was happier before her daughters started to be active within the community, Dorota’s father took his daughter’s interest in Judaism with even more difficulty. “The whole family was trying to leave it behind. Only I started to dig into it and my father was very angry at me. He was keeping it as a secret his whole life and I disrupted his efforts.” As her father did not support her desire for exploration, Dorota – like many other young Jews – found a source of information and new friendships within the SUJY. This union became a safe space where young Jews could learn about Jewishness. The social relations they built there enforced their sense of belonging and solidarity, based on the shared perception of ‘sameness’ in contrast to a dominant society of ‘others’, by exploring Judaism and Jewish customs together (which I will come to in the next chapter). Learning about her Jewishness was a crucial moment in Dorota’s life that changed how she perceived who she was
and affected how she started to relate to other people, when spending time with friends, but also when choosing a romantic partner (see Chapter Four).

Although practice plays an important role – especially as their older kin’s practices for years prevented young Jews’ knowing about their origins – as I have observed, it is perhaps the knowing that matters most. Knowing that one is different and does not belong to people one thought one did changes one’s everyday practices. While their understandings of themselves and their sense of belonging changes, for many young Jews, the knowledge of their origins does not trigger a deep and immediate search of what it entails to be Jewish. The question arises of how such knowledge changes one’s sense of self. The experiences of young Slovak Jews show that learning about one’s Jewishness is powerful information, and acquiring such constitutive knowledge reshaped not only their perception of the self, but also their relationships, in the process redefining the categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

**Conclusion**

Highlighting the relation between knowledge, a sense of belonging and (in)visibility, this chapter has explored how many young Slovak Jews understood their newly-discovered Jewishness and navigated the rupture learning this information produced, while making sense of the silenced past, and starting their process of becoming Jewish.

Finding out about one’s Jewish roots, as I have described, is a powerful, life-changing process. As a form of ‘constitutive knowledge’ (Strathern 1999), it influences how people perceive their personal identity and also how they relate to others. What makes this information so powerful, I argue, is on the one hand the fact that it was silenced and made invisible for so long by parents and grandparents; but on the other hand, the fact that it communicates kinship, religious, and political knowledge simultaneously. In light of the past – a previously distant awareness of the Shoah (among other things) became a part of their family history – and persistent
antisemitism, learning about their Jewishness made young Jews feel ‘othered’, and resulted in a shifting of loyalties that set them apart from their non-Jewish friends.

In this chapter, I have shown that it is exactly the vulnerability this unsafe, potentially risky and problematic character of this knowledge brings about, that motivates many people to conceal their Jewishness. Whether young Jews grew up knowing about their Jewishness or acquired this information later in their life, they were taught by their parents not to talk about it in public and to keep it secret. It is this strategy of ‘careful concealment’ that transmits the insecurity and worries of older generations, whose fears are based on their own experiences, to their descendants. The way young Jews are introduced to their Jewishness, however, contributed to their feelings of ‘otherness’; and as such, finding out, stimulated a process of distancing and alienation.

Trying to make sense of why one’s grandparents and parents were hiding their Jewishness – by changing their surnames, covering their concentration camp serial number tattoos, or not talking about and concealing their Jewish roots all together – young Jews realised the strength and power of this unsafe and fragile knowledge. As many of my informants expressed it, “learning this information changes everything, you cannot unlearn it.” This knowledge, therefore, is not only information (although it may be presented like that by their parents at the moment of discovery); it is ‘constitutive knowledge’ which changes not only young Jews’ perception of the present, but also of the past and imagined future.

While the first section of this chapter introduced this powerful knowledge and described how young Jews acquired it, and how it affected their immediate lives by producing a sense of ‘un-belonging’, the second section took us back in time and highlighted how these young people retrospectively reflected on their upbringing and the invisibility of Jewishness their parents and grandparents guarded. After discovering their Jewish roots, one of the ways these young people negotiated this new information was to uncover its presence in their upbringing, and to search for small details that would help them create some sense of continuity in this context of discrepancies. The final section brought us back to the post-discovery time and explored how this knowledge affected young Jews’ sense of self. Learning about one’s Jewishness, I argue, is a ‘constitutive knowledge’ that changes one’s
perception of the self, one’s sense of belonging and political allegiance – through its relational character stemming across different socialities of the present, but also the past and the imagined future – and motivates a search for more information about what it means and entails to be Jewish. The unique character of knowing one’s Jewishness and its ‘constitutive’ power lie in the entanglement of kinship, religion and politics that is essential to the process of becoming and being Jewish in post-Socialist Slovakia.
Chapter Two

Jewishness: Perceived, Practiced and Imagined

“You need to know someone in order to be welcomed in – or, actually, for anything to happen.” Lea, a 28-year-old halakhic Jew who had discovered her Jewishness only during her university studies (and whom we have met in Chapter One), was explaining to me how difficult it was to approach a Jewish community in Bratislava for people who had grown up outside the ‘Jewish circle’. “I think that when someone was brought up outside the Jewish tradition he or she would prefer to have a look at Judaism or Jewish life from outside, they do not want to immediately contact someone in the community. But it is all very much protected.” She noted that even the SUJY “protects information, so you need to log in to see anything. But they might be the most open to newcomers.”

Young Jews, like Lea, who wanted to learn more about their Jewish roots and Judaism could seek support and help at the Chabad educational centre in Bratislava. “But it’s only for people who are halakhically Jewish. Otherwise, you won’t find any support there,” Lea explained, speaking from personal experience. “The rabbi and his family are very nice, but their mission is to search for halakhic Jews,” she added. Upon finding out about her Jewishness, Lea wanted to learn more about Judaism, and to meet other Jewish people in Slovakia. “The rabbi and his wife were my little window into what it means to be Jewish. We were meeting regularly, they opened their door for me and I felt welcomed. They try to support and help Jews who are just now discovering their Jewishness.” Reflecting on this period of her life, with a sense of disappointment in her voice, she added, “That welcome was something I did not feel from the Jewish community here [in Bratislava]. It was very difficult.”

This chapter explores the experience of young Jews who, after discovering their Jewish roots tried to engage with Bratislava’s Jewish community in order to learn more about what it means, in practice, to be Jewish in Slovakia.
A feeling of realised ‘otherness’, as well as of uncertainty and insecurity, often makes people seek out community based on a certain ‘sameness’ among its members (Bauman 2001; Eriksen 2010b). Gaining a sense of belonging and acceptance becomes a matter of being perceived as one of ‘us’, in explicit contrast to ‘them’ (see Eriksen 2010a; Barth 1969, 1994; Cohen 2000, 1986, 1985). In the specific context of post-Socialist Slovakia, however, the Jewish community is marked by unexpected sorts of diversity, and its social life is characterised by the constant navigation of internal distinctions (see Bourdieu 1984). In this chapter, I show that the boundaries of the Jewish community in Slovakia are built not only around the politics of Jewishness or discourses of blood (see Kahn 2010; Bilaniuk 2010), but also around the lived experiences and choices made by the older generations during Socialism, in the context of significant socio-political risk – choices now cast in terms of courage and loyalty, or mistrust and betrayal (see also Thiranagama and Kelly 2010; Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016). Distinctions are made not only between those who are Jewish and non-Jewish, but also between those who are not ‘Jewish enough’, and those who cannot be fully trusted. I argue that these social distinctions are made and maintained to help people navigate relationships and investments of trust in the uncertain socio-political context of post-Socialist Slovakia, reflecting both past and present forms and practices of relatedness.

In the following sections, I discuss how young Jews negotiate and reinforce their often newly-discovered Jewishness at home and on different levels of the Jewish community. While community spaces become, to some degree, an extension of the home, I argue that the perception of a ‘safe space’ spanning the two spheres has limitations. I show how young Jews’ efforts to learn more about their Jewishness and take part in the community life are differentially perceived by other members of the Jewish community. I examine the distinctions that emerge between young Jews from different familial backgrounds, how these are created, justified and maintained, as well as how young Jews try to negotiate these ascribed statuses to gain some acceptance and recognition within the community. In the final section of the chapter, the discussion returns to the home, where I explore the ways young Jews reinforce their sense of Jewishness among kin – which may not be recognised by the
community as such – and thus at least temporarily escape the identity politics of Jewish organised life in post-Socialist Slovakia.

The generation gap at home and the desire to explore Jewishness

As shown in the previous chapter, after uncovering the family secret and finding out about their Jewish descent, many young Jews felt a desire to learn more about what it means to be Jewish, about Judaism and the heritage of their ancestors. For some, this desire emerged instantly; for others, it took time – sometimes even years – to materialise. What most had in common, however, was the attitudes of their parents and grandparents. Taking information about the family’s Jewishness to be unsafe and potentially dangerous, many members of the senior generations kept this secret from their children and grandchildren for years. Even after the moment of discovery – usually after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 – they advised their offspring to keep their heritage to themselves, and not to talk about it outside the home. Being Jewish for them, as I have shown in Chapter One, constituted not only a religious, ethnic or cultural identity, but also a political one. While the older generations employed what I have called a strategy of ‘careful concealment’, young Jews’ curiosity and desire to learn more and to meet new Jewish people often resulted in familial conflicts within the home.

Among the parents who found their children’s interest in learning more about Judaism the most problematic were Dorota’s father and Klara’s parents. As mentioned in Chapter One, Dorota’s father kept his Jewishness secret from his friends and colleagues, but also from his wife and children for many years. When Dorota started to engage with organised Jewish life in Bratislava, her father was more than displeased. “He was very angry with me for a long time,” she noted. The way she interpreted her father’s reaction was that, by approaching the community, she had not only gone against his advice, but also against his efforts to distance
himself from other Jews, a strategy also chosen by his parents.\textsuperscript{26} Familial experiences and memories of the Holocaust, as well as of life during Socialism, contributed to a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among the Jewish minority. Among the strategies of coping was an effort made by many to “stay away from everything openly Jewish.” Klara’s family decided to do the same. When I asked her father why they chose to distance themselves from the Jewish community, he simply stated, “It is not good to group.” While his wife, also coming from an endogamous Jewish family, agreed that “it is best when no one knows this about you,” according to Klara’s father, “grouping” specifically perpetuates antisemitism and xenophobia. “It is because we group and meet with each other separately that people feel uncomfortable and uncertain about Jews. We detach ourselves then and people may think we think we are better.” When Berenika and Klara realised they would like to know more about what it entails to be Jewish, their parents were scared about what their interest would bring.

After the political changes of 1989, and upon discovering their Jewishness, many young Jews decided to go against the strategies their older kin employed and reached out to the Jewish community. Those coming from families where knowledge had been hidden, and where there remained a reluctance to engage with Jewishness even after their discovery of this family secret, approached organised Jewish life in Bratislava in search of something the home did not provide. They desired knowledge as well as sociality; they wanted to learn more about their Jewishness, as well as to meet other Jewish people who might share their emotions, experiences and often also perplexities around finding out about one’s Jewishness later in life.

In the years following the Velvet Revolution, it was not only newly-aware young Jews who were reaching out; community was also being sought by young Jews who had grown up in family environments where they knew about their Jewishness and practiced some Jewish traditions. Teodor, a 35-year-old halakhic Jew, grew up in “a traditional household – especially when compared with the average Jewish family life.” They celebrated several Jewish holidays, and also Shabbat. “But mostly symbolically. It was not exotic in any way,” he clarified. While

\textsuperscript{26} Her engagement with the community caused her father to be approached by Jewish people who recognised him with matters about Jewish community life, which he had tried to avoid for several decades.
his father would still avoid any sort of work during Shabbat, for Teodor and his mother, “Saturdays are days of rest, naturally, without thinking about the religious rules.” At home they never had pork. “It was natural. I never felt I was missing something – my mother just never bought it.” Growing up, he knew about his Jewishness. As he recalls, “I was one of very few people who knew right away, most people I met found out about their Jewish roots only later in life. But I always knew. We even attended kostol [literally, ‘church’, a term that is usually used for Christian places of worship; but some Jews used it to talk about synagogues].” Barbora, too, had grown up knowing of her Jewish descent, in an endogamous family which continued to practice certain Jewish traditions – despite their experiences of persecution during the Holocaust and under Socialism. “I always knew I am a Jew. I did not need to search for it, my parents told me. It came from within the family.”

While for Teodor and Barbora, Jewishness and Jewish traditions were always part of their life, reaching adulthood and moving away from their home towns to pursue university degrees highlighted a need for something more.

After 1989, some young Jews – whether they had just recently discovered their Jewishness or had known for some time – felt a need to enlarge their ‘Jewish circle’, and decided to approach the SUJY or the larger Jewish community. Many wanted to learn more about what it actually entails to be Jewish, or to acquire a deeper understanding of the practices they saw at home, as well as to experience their Jewishness in a safe space outside of the home. Most young Jews also desired to meet other Jewish people of their own age. Some wanted to share their emotions and experiences, while others were already seeking Jewish life partners. What these two groups shared was an expectation in their upbringing to keep their Jewishness to themselves, and to avoid talking about it outside the home. The Jewish community and the SUJY, as supposed safe spaces, in many ways represented an extension of the home: a space where young Jews, as well as the older generations, could manifest their Jewishness without having to fear any sort of antisemitic reaction. Some people, however, later encountered the limitations of this ‘safety’. For them, the spaces of Jewish community were also ambivalent spaces, echoing both the ‘safe space’ of home and the unpredictable ‘outside’ – where one cannot escape certain forms of categorisation, judgement, and confrontation.
The SUJY and the politics of Jewishness

When young Jews decided to explore organised Jewish life in Bratislava, many of them found that the easiest way was to make contact with Jews of their own age – and they approached the SUJY. The SUJY was established soon after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, as a part of the Czechoslovak Union of Jewish Youth (CSUJY), and became an independent organisation after the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993. According to the official regulations of the SUJY, every person between 15 and 35 years of age who has Jewish descent – based on having at least one halakhically Jewish grandparent – could become a member of this Union. Young people who wished to join often had to prove their Jewishness, by providing the Union committee with official documentation – usually the birth certificate of their Jewish grandparent(s), which, if their grandparents were born before 1949, would state ‘izr.’ (Israelite) in the column for religion.27

Figure 3: Birth certificate from 1948, showing the religious affiliation of the father as Roman Catholic and that of the mother as ‘izr.’ (Israelite), and stating that the parents agreed their daughter will be ‘without religion’.

27 For more on the role of the state and control via documents, see Chapter One. On the transformation undergone by documents previously seen as discriminatory to those that currently serve as important sources of proof of one’s ‘halakhicness’, see also Chapter Five and Six.
Since its establishment, the SUJY has tried to create a social space for young people discovering their Jewishness – whether they had just found out about their Jewish roots, or simply wanted to learn more about Judaism and socialise with people with whom they had something crucial in common. The Union still provides what I would call a ‘safe space’, where young people who are exploring their Jewishness can share their sense of ‘otherness’ in a context in which they are surrounded by people with similar experiences. Exploring the role that the SUJY has played in people’s lives, I came to realise an important change that has affected young Jews’ engagement with the Jewish community as such. When discussing the SUJY, people who were in their late thirties and early forties at the time of my fieldwork looked back with nostalgia, and described the unique atmosphere and popularity of events during the 1990s and early 2000s with passion.

Tobias, a 41-year-old doctor from an endogamous Bratislava family, witnessed the very beginnings of the CSUJY. “It was a winter seminar in 1991 when it all started. A group of young Jews met in one place and the European Union of Jewish Students sent us a few representatives who came to help us organise that workshop and teach us about Jewishness.” Reflecting on the atmosphere of that period, Tobias said, “It was a time when everyone was hungry for information. It was something new for all of us.” He added, “When you’re 18 or 19 and suddenly a new world opens up – a world that was non-existent for many, alternatively it was tabooed, so it had the taste of something forbidden and unknown – at that age you don’t need much, you jump after it and absorb everything you can.” This hunger and fascination produced a social life for Jewish youth that suddenly developed exponentially. “While in 1990 there was almost nothing, suddenly a year later there was CSUJY, which had around 400 members, and organised regular seminars that were attended by easily 200 people.”

During the 1990s, the Union of Jewish Youth, as Stela and many others remembered, was a very vibrant and active group. “It was total euphoria,” she recalled. Young Jews were publishing their own journal, Chochmes (wisdom), and organising spring and autumn seminars, as well as summer trips to chosen towns to
clean and restore some Jewish landmarks (often cemeteries). Every Friday evening, they met at the JCC. As Stela reflected:

Each week we met up as a big group, even though there were of course smaller groups that did not get along very well, we still met as one group in the club room [at the JCC]. Someone made a Kiddush and lit the candles. We would check who came that evening and then we slowly dispersed into those smaller groups, with our friends, to separate pubs. But that was also because there were big age differences too, you know, someone five years older than you was already like a new generation. But we always met all together first.

The SUJY offered young Jews a base for acquiring knowledge, creating solidarity and lifelong relationships – both amicable and, for a few, also romantic. As Barbora, a 34-year-old halakhic Jew from Southern Slovakia who joined the SUJY in 1997, recalled, “the atmosphere was amazing – it was very strong.” Meeting every Friday evening, for many, became a “core of social life.”

Apart from this, the SUJY became a ‘gate-keeping organisation’, a window to the wider Jewish community. Stela, a 36-year-old non-halakhic Jew who found out about her Jewish roots only after 1989, joined the Union almost immediately upon making the discovery. Being an active member of the CSUJY and SUJY, she claimed that this social space served also as an experimental one for young Jews who wanted to try “how it feels to be Jewish”, who could then decide whether they would like to engage with the Jewish community as such. “The Friday meetings were, for many, a first entry to Jewishness, and then some stayed while others never came back. It was a very open, uncommitted, social setting,” she explained, adding, “you wouldn’t go straight to a service on Rosh Hashanah, but you simply come to a club on Friday and go with others to a cinema. That was something that everyone could try.”

While during Stela’s time most people would stop engaging with the SUJY after they graduated from university, usually around the age of 25 or 26, the members I met during my fieldwork often stayed active until their early thirties. Those who leave the SUJY earlier do so mostly because they have found a life partner, are married and having a family.

With time, the number of active members dropped significantly. While the seminars in the 1990s were well-attended, during my fieldwork in 2012-2014,
attendance at seminars stood between 40 and 70 young Jews. The regular smaller events organised in Bratislava were usually attended in numbers below 20, with a tendency for the same core people to come, a few irregulars picking events they liked. During the time of my fieldwork, the SUJY regularly organised various events – lectures and talks on religious, historical and cultural themes, film screenings, social gatherings, celebrations of Jewish holidays and themed parties – to attract more people. Despite trying to satisfy the different interests of their (potential) members, the issue of low attendance appeared to be an unsolvable problem. Some people looked for an explanation in demographics, arguing there might be fewer Jewish children, or attributing the lack of interest among Jewish youth to the exogamous marriages of their parents. Others, such as Lea, claimed that “just being Jewish is now not enough, and young people need a larger incentive” to step out of their circles of friends and approach the SUJY or the Jewish community. Still others argued that it was a combination of these factors, and the fact that adolescents now have something that young Jews in the 1990s did not have – multiple sources of information. “If they can find everything online, they don’t need to come here. They live their anonymous lives and maybe don’t even miss having other Jewish people around,” Teodor said. But I suggest that there is another issue affecting how young Jewish people feel about their engagement with the SUJY: the level of openness and sense of being welcomed and accepted that they seek there.

Despite the SUJY membership rules extending the boundaries of Jewishness set by the Halakhah, during my fieldwork I met people who did not feel very welcome there. Maria, a 29 year old entrepreneur, confessed to me that, in spite of her halakhic descent, she never felt comfortable at the SUJY. She reasoned that her discomfort arose because she came from a small town in Central Slovakia, where her family had not practiced any Jewish traditions during Socialism. “They look down upon people like me. I even heard from my friend who got in touch with them to say that she would like to become a member – and the reply she received was, ‘Well, we have enough non-halakhic members’. You just do not feel welcomed.” It was a cold evening, a few months after my arrival in Bratislava, when Maria shared this important impression she had of the SUJY over a warm dinner – and the first time
we had met. She felt my ‘foreignness’ to the town and its Jewish life would enable me to accept without judging how she felt about it.

Mentioning that she would like to engage more in the religious life of the community, one day soon after our dinner, Maria invited me to join her for a Torah reading class she learned about on Facebook. After walking part of the way up the street towards the JCC, we stopped and rang the bell on the front door of a building with no visible sign of what we might find inside, and waited for a gatekeeper to open the door for us. “What do you want?” a tall, bearded man asked sternly. “We are going to the Torah study group meeting,” Maria replied, obviously not appreciating the tone of his question. “Okay, you can go. Just follow the stairs to the basement. The door right across the hall.” When we entered the room, there were seven men, of various ages, sitting around a table talking to the rabbi. “Why did you come? How did you find out about this?” the rabbi asked directly. The gender ratio in the room made me wonder whether it was not a male-only study session, and I started to worry. Maria replied, “I saw an invitation on the SUJY’s Facebook page.” “Ah, okay. You can sit down,” said the rabbi, distributing the text of that week’s parsha (weekly Torah reading).28

“See, I am halakhic and still I am made to feel like I am intruding,” Maria said on our way to the bus station. I did not see her at any community event after that. I only came to fully understand the context and significance of Maria’s response to the incident later, when I began to understand how identity politics works within the Jewish community, and how one’s family background influences one’s social status.

The issue of distinction, and perceived inequality, materialised in several recurrent tensions during my stay in Bratislava. Although these concerns were least apparent within the SUJY, the regular turnover of people in leadership posts contributed to a sense of diversity in this Union, tied to temporality and the approach of particular committees. This element of leadership, viewpoint and time brought

---

28 After this session, I attended the Torah reading class almost every week. Getting to know the rabbi, explaining that I was not Jewish but was interested to learn more and meet new people, as well as describing my doctoral project helped me to feel comfortable and welcome within this group. With time, the gender ratio shifted, and two or three women started to attend the sessions regularly. One of them was Klara, who got interested when I mentioned that I was attending these sessions; Rebeka, a young halakhic woman from Bratislava, and her mother would also come.
about varied experiences of young Jews through the last 20 years. Teodor, who came from a small town in Southern Slovakia and moved to Bratislava to pursue his university studies, had been a member of the SUJY for more than 12 years when I met him. While telling me stories about Union life, he admitted to me that, even though he comes from an endogamous, practicing family, “there was always something that divided us – Jews from the rest of Slovakia, and those who grew up in Bratislava.” This apparent differentiation between families who lived in Bratislava and those from outside the city resurfaced from time to time. When I tried to bring the issue up in conversations with people whose families have their roots in the capital, the reactions would often suggest that such perceptions of inequality were fuelled by their own sense of insecurity. With time, however, it became clear that the negotiation of status runs through every aspect of the everyday life of Jews in Bratislava – whether it is connected to their ‘halakhicness’, their marital choices, or their willingness to practice Jewish traditions openly, in ways that might attract risk. Continuous assessment of these differences, spoken in low voices but strident tones, induced many tensions within the community.

Who is Jewish? Drawing community boundaries

During my fieldwork, a person could become a member of ‘židovská náboženská obec’, the Jewish Religious Congregation (JRC), if they could prove their Jewish descent either by having a halakhically Jewish mother or a halakhically Jewish father.29 This ‘liberalisation’ took place a few years ago, motivated by a similar shift on the part of the Prague Jewish Congregation. But there are people in the community, like Eleonora, who did not like this ‘opening up’ of community boundaries. “I see that we are making huge compromises. Gradually there might be

29 Although the official membership regulations of the JRC from 2010 state that potential members must have (or have had) a Jewish mother (according to the Halakhah), a Jewish father (according to the Halakhah), or one Jewish grandparent (according to the Halakhah), this last criterion is usually overlooked. The JRC is often contrasted with the SUJY on this score, and the SUJY is frequently considered more open because it welcomes people who have only one Jewish grandparent. People in the JRC never spoke of the third criterion; many were even displeased by the second one, which they felt was “too liberal.”
only a Jewish grandparent as a requirement. Maybe not even that.” According to Eleonora, the new regulations on membership criteria came into place six years ago. “I do not know whether it is the number of Jews we are trying to enlarge, but I do not like what is happening,” she asserted.

Eleonora is a 63-year-old grandmother who comes from an endogamous and practicing Jewish background. She was encouraging about opening up the community to “sympathisers” – “people who are not Jewish at all but want to take part in events, for example even in a synagogue” – as a way of helping the Christian majority to understand Judaism. But she made clear that she does “not agree with non-halakhic Jews being accepted as full-fledged members of the Jewish Religious Congregation in the same way as Jews who are halakhic.” Elaborating, she argued, “those people do not belong to the community as Jews, they can be honorary members or somehow name their membership, but not as full-fledged members.” In a lower voice, she confessed that “there are some people raising ideas about closing down the membership criteria again and welcoming only halakhic Jews.” Realising that her position had a political edge, Eleonora referred to the Torah to support her argument. “There might be people who were not brought up the way I was, but these are the rules. I always say, ‘Who has the right to change the Old Testament?’ No one ever taught us to change the law.” On reflection, she continued, “It’s true that we modernise some things; but that should not happen either because the Old Testament is the Old Testament, but maybe we adapt it slightly to the time we live in. But the matter of whether someone is Jewish or not, in my opinion, should stay the way it was.” With a shade of displeasure in her voice, she argued, “I do not like how we, now in Bratislava, have made them Jews. Because, you know, now it is that if someone has a Jewish father, they are Jewish. But we do not have the right to change the rules.” According to Eleonora’s reasoning, what makes people Jewish is the community recognising them as such. Her comments shed light on the importance of recognition and acceptance – yet show that these may be contested, and have a perpetually unresolved and tense aspect – allowing us to see deeper into the tensions surrounding identity politics within this community.

From the perspective of Slovak Jews coming from endogamous practicing Jewish families, like Eleonora, the Velvet Revolution in 1989 produced an
unexpected new social phenomenon: the emergence of “the new Jews.” “After the revolution,” Eleonora explains, “Jewishness became popular. I don’t know why, but somehow people started to like the idea of being Jewish, they even searched for their Jewish roots so they could say they are Jews. I don’t like this even today. Judaism is not an easy religion, it’s not an easy faith.”

To illustrate the differences between Jews who “appeared after the revolution” and Jews coming from “more traditional families who were not afraid to practice even during Socialism”, Eleonora shared with me a story about how their interactions often result in misunderstandings. While they were attending a women’s club meeting before Pesach,

The rabbi’s wife asked us how we were preparing for this holiday. I always take a few days off from work to clean the house properly. The same way my mother did. She would start a month before Pesach to clean all the cupboards, we even moved the furniture around to make sure. I do a big cleaning every year, the kitchen, everything. When the rabbi’s wife asked how we were getting on, I could not believe what I heard. Those new Jews, they do not understand. They may know that you are not supposed to eat bread during Pesach, but nothing else. “I still need to clean the windows,” one of the women said. I was just thinking, why is she talking about windows? These new Jews just cannot get it properly because they were not brought up in it. They talk about cleaning the windows, but Pesach is about cleaning the shelves and cupboards, and everything around them, to make sure there are no bread-crumbs left in the house.

Eleonora’s story sheds light on how social distinctions are made on the basis of different kinds of knowledge – as well as different experiences of history and familial memory – associated with the right to claim one’s Jewishness. On the one hand, there is knowledge which is embodied in one’s upbringing; and on the other, there is knowledge learned later in life from books, always imperfect, lacking the depth and implicit understandings that one acquires only through practice from a young age (see also Bourdieu 1984). Knowledge of traditions like housecleaning before Pesach, but also of specific people and their familial histories, plays a significant role in informing and maintaining community distinctions.

I heard the term ‘new Jews’ many times over the course of my fieldwork, but the first time anyone mentioned the term in my presence was the most striking. Bartolomej, a 60-year-old man from a background similar to Eleonora’s, used the
term while proposing a rhetorical question that uncovered a new layer of community life to me. We were walking from a Wednesday Torah reading group session, and Bartolomej commented, “There are all these people, the ‘new Jews’, they come to the surface only when it is after all that… before 1989 they were scared, and now they come and say they are Jewish.” As the conversation progressed, he began reflecting on one young Jewish man in particular, and asked: “I do not know who he is – is he Jewish?!?” This question made me pause. He had known Oliver for several years, met him regularly at the rabbi’s Torah reading class, and also at synagogue services. Looking straight into my eyes as if waiting for a reaction, he continued, “I do not know his family. Where were they during Socialism?” He was quiet for a moment. “These people just come out of the protective shadows when the situation gets better, but they were not there when we were going to shul and the secret police agents were coming in with us, pretending to be one of us, observing what we did and who went in.” The message he was trying to convey raised many questions and shed light on the identity politics within this small Jewish community in East-Central Europe. What makes a person Jewish in the light of the past and the reality of today? How does the past, its political and familial histories, affect claims to Jewishness?

It was after this conversation with Bartolomej, and after I became acquainted with the context surrounding the term ‘new Jews’, that I understood what Maria meant about not feeling welcomed. Coming from a family that was not known – because it “disappeared” from Jewish communal life after the Second World War or during Socialism, when “things got worse” and practicing religious traditions more dangerous – brought with it a distinct status coloured by questions of descent as well as disloyalty and betrayal.

As we have seen, after the Second World War, Jewish families employed a variety of ways to distance themselves from Jewish organised life. Some people intermarried and kept their Jewishness to themselves; others – such as Klara’s parents – decided to stay away from anything remotely associated with Judaism, and incorporated Christian traditions and customs instead to hide their ‘otherness’. The strategy of changing surnames after the Second World War, as discussed in Chapter One, also obscured or erased a prominent sign of distinction and belonging among the Jewish minority. After four decades of Socialism, young Jews approaching the
JRC or the SUJY thus often came from ‘unknown’ families, making it harder for them to negotiate their place. As the links of familiarity between those families who continued practising and those that ‘disappeared’ had been broken, young ‘new Jews’ who attempted to reconnect with the community were not completely accepted nor fully trusted.

In this sense, the decisions and strategies of young Jews’ forebears – whether understood in terms of loyalty and courage, or in terms of betrayal – influence how young Jews are perceived today by their elders in the community, and also how they relate to one another. While Teodor argued that Jewish families could respond to the risky circumstances of Socialist Czechoslovakia as they wished, and emphasised his pride in “the guráž (courage) of [his] parents,” his wife Lea explained that things were not so simple.

Upon discovering her Jewishness only later in her life, Lea started to engage with organised Jewish life in Bratislava, and was cast by community members as a ‘new Jew’ herself. “The families that devoted everything, even if it was secretly, during Communism, to making sure their tradition will stay alive – to making sure that the heritage would remain, even to the point of losing something because of it (like a job),” Lea explained, “these families, even though they themselves would probably not acknowledge it, have the attitude of: ‘Where do you come from now? You new ones!’” As Lea confessed to me, it was not always easy to negotiate this status. “I even heard with my own ears people saying, ‘These new ones dilute things here! They know nothing! Where did they come from?!’” In contrast to the concern that ‘new Jews’ “weaken the community because of the lack of knowledge,” Lea argued that she did “not think that most people there have much knowledge about Judaism. Even those with halakhic descent. But they mean it literally, the way they say ‘We are the ones who kept it alive, and where were these others?’” These questions, hurtful to many, reappeared in different contexts throughout my fieldwork. The distinctions marked by being more or less visible in different historical and political settings fuelled an ongoing need for ‘new Jews’ to negotiate their Jewishness in the light of their families’ decisions and choices. “I think it is very unfair,” Lea noted, “they could realise that not everyone was so lucky that he or she could continue.”
The phrasing of these questions and comments draw on concerns about loyalty, courage and betrayal, reflecting the willingness of people to take risks for their Jewishness and the heritage of their ancestors. But by noting that “not everyone … could continue,” Lea draws our attention to other key contextual concerns: the importance of place (here, urban versus rural), and time, and different evaluations of what was at stake. “It is one thing if they suspected or even knew you were Jewish, and another if they discovered that you were religious and practicing,” Barbora explained while describing how her family practiced Jewish traditions in secret, trying to hide them from neighbours or friends. “Being openly religious was not a good thing during Communism.” Secularising efforts, together with anti-Jewish inclinations, caused many people to account more carefully for these risks.

Teodor’s and Lea’s diverse experiences within one marriage highlight tensions that emerge between people from different familial backgrounds, and the distinctions created and maintained between their attributed statuses. While one group of people, including Lea and Maria, needed to negotiate their Jewishness within the new setting of the Jewish community, seeking recognition and a sense of acceptance, others who had been raised in a Jewish environment – especially in Bratislava and neighbouring towns, where active Jewish life was maintained under Socialism – did not experience this need to the same extent.

As we have seen, tensions stemming from distinctions based on identity politics also appear in more diverse contexts, like the SUJY. But due to its position as a ‘safe space’, SUJY produces yet another phenomenon. While there is a visible trend in the Jewish community towards people ‘resurfacing’ and claiming their Jewishness after years of silence, the SUJY experiences also another type of ‘resurfacing’. One day, after the taglit (a free trip to Israel, based on birth-right) application deadline, Alena mentioned to me in an annoyed voice, “You see all these people applying. Where are they during the year? I call them ‘closet-Jews’. They hide their Jewishness. I do not even think they feel Jewish, but they come out when there is an opportunity to go somewhere for free.” With a growing irritation in her voice she continued, “They go for a free trip to Israel, but after that they disappear again. This, for me, is faulty Jewish identity.” This ‘coming out’ in the form of what seemed like temporary identification created a sense of disingenuousness and further
stimulated carefulness and suspicion towards ‘newcomers’ who might have just found out about their Jewishness.

In light of the socio-political uncertainties of Jewish life in post-Socialist Slovakia, social distinctions are made and maintained, I argue, as a means of navigating relationships and investments of trust. Such distinctions become especially helpful when relationships are built across the boundaries based on descent and allegiance. Both arising when people perceived as ‘new Jews’ come from mixed familial backgrounds, and their loyalty and sense of belonging are seen as less stable due to their other potential identifications.

‘Fitting in’: What makes a person ‘Jewish enough’?

Identity politics creates tensions between different layers of the community. Milena, an 84-year-old Holocaust survivor, described facing these tensions when people referred to her as “Mischling (‘mixed-blood’).” “You know, because my mother was not Jewish, Jews do not see me as Jewish, but because my father was Jewish, Christians see me as a Jew. I was called a Mischling many times during my childhood.” People who have Jewish roots from the paternal side of their family face various tensions. Although Dorota, a 29-year-old lawyer, found out about the Jewishness of her father’s family only when she was 15, she feels strongly Jewish. She felt welcomed at the SUJY, but found her reception in the broader Jewish community more mixed. Trying to fit in, young Jews like Dorota face not only the question of where they have been until now, but also the distinctions created by the Halakhah and enforced by Rabbi Myers.

However, the situation surrounding identity politics, as I found out, was not always framed in the terms of the Halakhah. At the SUJY in the 1990s, as Barbora recalled, people did not refer to the Halakhah, but rather distinguished among themselves using two terms: celý and polovičný. The word celý describes a state of being whole or complete, while the term polovičný is used in everyday Slovak to articulate when something is, literally, ‘half’. In this context, celý implies that a
person has two Jewish parents, while *polovičný* indicates only one Jewish parent. According to Barbora, it was not important whether that one Jewish parent was a mother or father. “We did not distinguish among ourselves whether someone was halakhical or not, whether someone was Jewish through his mother or father,” Barbora explained. “We all came from a certain point and suddenly we were all in the SUJY and we did not argue about who is halakhical and who is not,” she continued; “when someone came to the Union, obviously that person had some relation to Jewishness and we all, or most of us, did not know much anyway. So we all attended the lectures and learned about it together.” According to young Jews, the moment when the halakhic definition of Jewishness became important came with the arrival of Rabbi Myers in 1993. The point when halakhic discourse influenced the way people related to each other within the SUJY, however, according to Barbora, came only towards the late 1990s, when the rabbi and his teachings became more internalised by the whole community. “This is something that came with the rabbi and he was the one who used it to create a distinction among us, especially when concerning marriage and whose children can attend the Chabad kindergarten.” Before the arrival of the ultra-orthodox rabbi, the fact of whether someone’s maternal family was Jewish did not play the same role it does today. “Maybe people wanted a *celého* Jewish partner then, but realising the reality of Jewish life in Slovakia, they were happy with a partner who was *polovičný*,” Barbora recalled. Before this change, it was not the *Halakhah* that influenced how young Jews perceived themselves and other Jews, but rather their parents’ marital choices – and whether they came from an endogamous marriage or an exogamous union.

Although the SUJY was perhaps less exclusive, this distinction was still present and influencing young Jews’ sense of belonging. When the ultra-orthodox rabbi arrived, the changes he brought were strict yet simple: there are no ‘non-halakhic Jews’; only a person who has a Jewish mother, or who has undergone orthodox conversion, is a Jew. As a result, many people who felt Jewish – though they did not technically fulfil the rules of the *Halakhah* – found themselves suddenly excluded from that identity.

While Rabbi Myers played a very important role within the SUJY and in community life broadly, and while he stimulated a wave of engagement among
young Jews, his position discouraged many. As Stela described, the arrival of the rabbi greatly influenced the way she perceived herself. Given the values he stressed, her non-halakhic descent made her feel not ‘Jewish enough’, despite the strength of her identification. “Because of the hunger for information and knowledge that was here, the rabbi became our moral and religious authority – he became our rabbi,” Stela explained. “We spent a lot of time with him and his family, for whom there was no other alternative to the ultra-orthodox way of life, and at that young age, we were easily influenced by someone who had such religious authority.” The rabbi and his wife, as many young Jews recalled, often discussed the topic of marriage and the importance of choosing marital partners well. “There was, however, also always the issue of who is a Jew.” For Stela, this question was very important because of her ‘non-halakhicness’. Even with the Law of Return, and the SUJY’s flexible membership requirements, many young Jews like Stela suddenly felt they were not ‘Jewish enough’. “The State of Israel respects the reality of this region, that we had the Second World War and also Communism, but then and there I was not Jewish – despite the fact that I felt more Jewish than anything else. As I still do.” With sadness and traces of anger in her voice, she elaborated, “within the SUJY, no one ever made me feel like there was a problem, but as soon as there was contact with the rabbi and his family, immediately it was not okay.” When they were discussing the issue of whom to marry, trying to show young Jews that marrying someone Jewish is crucial, Stela felt that “suddenly, the discussion of this topic did not concern me. It was very hurtful at that age.” “As they are Lubavitch they do not see another alternative,” she sighed, adding, “They may not realise it, but their formulations, saying that ‘if you are from a mixed marriage and you feel Jewish, but you are not halakhical, then it is as if you are a soul trapped in the wrong body’ are upsetting.” Trying to veil the emotions that her memories triggered, Stela continued, “Retrospectively, I see that their formulations were very hurtful. At that time, I did not know how to cope with it internally. So my question was more whether to convert and how. Because I did not want to face the stigma anymore that in someone’s eyes I was not a Jew.”

Four years ago, Stela and a few others converted under Liberal Rabbi Goldstein, who used to come to Bratislava monthly to give a lecture and lead a Liberal Shabbat service. While many felt that the possibility of having an orthodox
conversion in Bratislava was non-existent, several people converted with the Liberal rabbi. Stela explained,

He used to come for Thursday and Friday. On Thursdays he gave a lecture and on Friday there was a service and a sort of lecture. While for others these lectures were more of a hobby, for me and two other people preparing with me, they were a part of our educational process. Moreover, we had some consultations and had to prepare answers for questions – just like for high school examinations.

Rabbi Goldstein, as Stela says, “had adopted the community.” Although during the time of my fieldwork he came to Bratislava only a few times, there was a small group of people from wide spectrum of ages that always looked forward to his visits and attended the services and workshops he prepared. “Rabbi Goldstein was very important. He fulfilled the functions that Rabbi Myers would never fulfil. For example, he married people who were not halakhically Jewish and also made a baby-name-giving ceremony for a girl. He does not have a problem with anything. In a way, he brought to us new traditions and attitudes that correspond to our values more.”

Despite the alternatives, for many people, Rabbi Myers still represented the authentic way of Jewish life within the community. Not everyone recognised Liberal conversions as valid. The issues of identity politics around the Halakhah and the category of ‘new Jews’ perpetuated existing distinctions, and made it even more difficult for young Jews from different backgrounds to negotiate their Jewishness, and to achieve acceptance and recognition. Gaining such legitimisation, however, is not a quick nor simple process (as I show in Chapter Four, Five and Six). In response, many young Jews sought alternative contexts in which to substantiate the ways they “felt Jewish” – often returning to the ‘safe spaces’ of their own homes.
“We do this to feel Jewish”: Performance and personhood at home

The various statuses young Jews are ascribed – from non-halakhic, not-‘Jewish enough’, through ‘closet-Jews’, to ‘new Jews’ and halakhic Jews – permeates all levels of organised Jewish life. The only space where the constant need to negotiate one’s Jewishness or to strive for recognition is attenuated or disappears, even if only temporarily, is the ‘safe space’ of the home. Having begun our discussion in their natal homes, and having followed it through the complex context of the SUJY and the wider Jewish community, this section takes us back to the sphere of home – and into the homes young Jews created for themselves.

The home was a space where young Jews – irrespective of how they were perceived by the rabbi or other members of the Jewish community – felt they could freely reinforce their feelings of Jewishness, on their own terms and in their own time, by performing traditions and customs they liked to the extent that they felt comfortable. Within the space of home, no external recognition was required. For many, the home was the only place where they felt they could openly claim their Jewishness without worrying that someone would say they were not ‘Jewish enough’.

Material culture, language learning, and ‘Jewish literature’

One of the ways young Jews tried to strengthen their sense of Jewishness was through decorating their homes with Jewish material culture. All households I visited had a candelabrum – whether it was a menorah or hanukiah. Young Jews usually had at least one on their display shelves. Whether inherited or bought, used or otherwise, the candelabra still played an important role in affirming and reinforcing Jewishness. Next on the shelves were photographs, usually of the family and their trips to Israel; and in some homes, souvenirs from these visits were also displayed, including Israeli flags, key chains, or decorative porcelain. While some went to Israel for a ten-day taglit trip, others visit the country regularly to see relatives who live there. Most
people had a small pendant – whether of the letter *chai* (חי), the Star of David, or the *hamsa* (palm-shaped amulet) – they were given as a gift or bought for themselves (further discussed in Chapter Three). A gradually growing trend of owning Jewish cookbooks and learning to cook in the “Jewish style” was also evident. Both Klara and Eliska were often eager to share new recipes they had learned, reflecting on how the taste reminded them of a meal they had eaten at the rabbi’s house or at their grandparents’. These material objects, inherited artefacts or new ones bought to remind themselves of their Jewish roots, were put on shelves or hung on walls to help young Jews feel Jewish – regardless of how others perceived them.

Another way young Jews tried to connect with their Jewish heritage was via language and literary sources. Upon finding out about his Jewish descent, Filip started to learn Hebrew. It was a means of satisfying the “urge to do something about this discovery.” For Klara, the motivation came later when her sister made *aliyah*, and she felt it would be something they might both continue to share. While few young Jews were keen to learn modern Hebrew, the majority of them sought to satisfy their curiosity about the history of Jewish life in present-day Slovakia, or about the lives of Jews around the world, in books. Some were especially interested in Judaism as such, and read work by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks; others preferred novels written by Jewish authors such as Isaac Bashevis Singer or Chaim Potok. Jews of the young generation frequently asked one another, “Have you read this?” in various contexts; the replies would be taken to index the respondent’s interest in learning about their Jewish heritage.

**Selective performance**

What made people ‘feel Jewish’ the most, however, was the practicing of Jewish traditions. Performance, as I have observed, constituted another level of reinforcing personhood and one’s sense of being Jewish. The impact it made is tied to the space in which it is undertaken, but also to the importance attributed to certain acts. Practicing within the community setting, where the act was witnessed and recognised by people, had a stronger and more immediate effect; but performing chosen
traditions and customs within the space of home also created the desired emotional experience of “feeling Jewish.” More importantly, at home, such performances created this emotion regardless of whether any recognition from the community was possible. Home here becomes a ‘safe space’ where people can do what they like without being judged on whether their performances – or they themselves – are ‘Jewish enough’.

Although the Jewish community, as I have argued, is understood to be an extension of home, and thus a Jewish ‘safe space’, it is also contrasted with the space of the home – which is marked as a comparatively ‘distinction-free’ environment. For negotiating Jewishness, these two spaces go hand in hand. Young Jews’ efforts in these two settings are complementary, making their presence visible and demonstrating their devotion, while simultaneously hiding this performance from the non-Jewish ‘outside’ (see Chapter Three).

“When I asked my mother what she thought about the direction I chose, she said that she thinks the genes jumped over two generations, and according to her I am like her grandmother. She said she is proud of that,” Lea explained to me, adding that her mother does not like to “group or associate with any Jewish stuff.” After discovering her Jewishness and learning more about Judaism, Lea married a Jewish man, Teodor, with whom she now has two small children. Her newly-discovered Jewishness became an important part of her sense of self, and she realised she would like to transmit these feelings also to their children. When she and her husband first set up their new married life, she explained, “we started to do two sets of holidays at home. But loosely – just so it would be nice and we would find out the main idea behind it. Basically, we did not have a tradition, so we are creating it now ourselves.” While Teodor comes from a “traditional home”, Lea is perceived by people in the community as a ‘new Jew’. At home, she tries to study so that she knows how to perform certain traditions, and “so they would be done ‘correctly’ according to the books.” Pointing to several publications about Jewish life and the Torah, she said, “I am trying to implement as much as possible, but only up to a certain point. We found our own way as a family. We want to know and do as much as we can to an extent we like. We practice the things that we find nice and pleasant, or things that we consider necessary in order to feel Jewish.” This sentiment characterised the efforts
of many people I knew to come closer to Judaism. The aim, for many, was to do enough to “feel Jewish” – and, as I have explained, to be seen to be Jewish by others.

“Yes, we do try to practice all holidays,” Lea explained, gesturing towards the menorah on the display shelf in their living room. “We try to celebrate all holidays, but on various levels – according to how Teodor was taught to observe particular holidays at home.” Leaning closer, she continued, “I have an equal relationship to all holidays. For me it is like ‘ah, this is a part of the Jewish year’. But he takes Hanukah, for example, very emotionally. So we take it from the perspective of how they celebrated particular holidays at home. To him some holidays are closer, for some he does not care so much.”

This dissimilar relationship to particular traditions highlighted the difference in Lea’s and Teodor’s upbringing, as well as the difference in their relative status within the community. While Teodor preferred certain traditions, connecting them with warm familial memories, Lea learned about all traditions and the ways they should be celebrated all at once, from books, after discovering her Jewishness. To navigate these differences within their home, Lea took her husband’s attachment to certain holidays as a guide, and tried to find compromises concerning the rest. But even more than holidays, many people associated ‘feeling Jewish’ with specific foods and eating habits – and in this sphere, Lea influenced her husband.

‘You are what you eat’

“What you eat is important,” Eleonora said, smiling and offering me a piece of her home-made apple pie. “It is kosher,” she added proudly. “You know when I was a child, I remember, I had a strong desire to eat a Russian egg salad,” she confessed, pausing to make sure I understood what this dish – typical in Slovakia’s years of Socialism – was. Russian egg salad can still be found on the refrigerator shelves of supermarkets, holding to its name. It is usually a mix of hard-boiled egg, boiled potatoes, pickles, onions, carrots and peas, with spiced mayonnaise and at least one type of salami, often packed in a plastic box as a serving for one. “But I never ate it, because that would go against religion,” she quickly affirmed. When Eleonora started
to work, as for many others, her eating habits changed and adapted more to the environment she lived in. “Outside I ate normally, but at home I ate kosher of course.”

Jews of the older generations have memories of their parents keeping the laws of kashrut, and many tried to eat according to these dietary rules for at least some part of their lives. As Barbora recalls, her grandparents, despite everything they went through during the war, would not eat meat unless the animal was killed by a shochet (a person specially trained to slaughter animals so that the meat would fulfil the laws of kashrut). Although her parents slowly compromised this tradition, as they ate at their work and their children ate in the school dining hall, there was always a felt need to keep to this practice, at least to a certain degree. “This is something I feel is a very important devotion from my grandparents’ side, and now I cannot imagine I would just go and eat a pork klobása [sausage].” For Barbora,

it is a mix of religiosity and tradition, but it is all based on what we had at home – as if it was our own home tradition – not the written scripts. The family history plays a very important role for me. What my family went through and how it still did not affect their values is crucial.

For some young Jews, such as Barbora, the persistence of traditions across their family’s history – in spite of their experiences of the Shoah and of Socialism – represented a strong incentive to keep certain customs in their family’s honour, and constituted a crucial point of identification.

During Socialism, when some Jewish families could not get kosher meat, they would buy “normal meat” and perform what they described as košerovanie (‘making something kosher’ or ‘koshering’) – a practice that involved leaving the piece of meat in salt for long enough that the salt would take out all of the blood. After the war, however, many families put less emphasis on keeping “restrictive religious practice”. With time and age, some of them rediscovered an appreciation of eating kosher. Tom, a Holocaust survivor in his late 80s, was one of these. We met every Wednesday morning at the Jewish Senior Club, where he would greet me with a big smile, saying, “I saved you a seat next to me.” After the weekly lecture and discussion, he would always go for lunch at the canteen of the JCC. The canteen was a small one storey building, standing separately from the rest of the centre, in the
middle of the back garden. It consisted of a kitchen and dining hall with large windows, and several tables with four to six chairs around them. Tom had his favourite place to sit. “I sit here because I can see everyone,” he once noted while we were eating together. The food at the canteen was considered neither particularly tasty nor specifically Jewish by most people, but especially by younger Jews. While the selection of meals resembled Slovak cuisine, the difference was that it was kosher. The kitchen was under the strict supervision of Rabbi Myers (who was also the community’s shochet for the poultry), being one of the few places in Bratislava where one could get a kosher meat dish or meal (apart from the rabbi’s house, the homes of a few observant Jews, and the SUJY events). Most of the times I ate there, we were served chicken (always a bit too salty) with rice and a vegetable salad or fruit compote. That day, Tom giggled when I mentioned the saltiness of the meat, and joked, “Yes, you can feel it. It is Jewish.” “Wednesdays are the only days I eat kosher,” he added, explaining that at home he consumes what his non-Jewish wife cooks. “I am not picky, but Wednesdays are nice.” For Tom as well as many others, eating in the community canteen is a pleasant opportunity to meet other people and to eat kosher – even if they complain about the taste of the meals as such.

The attractiveness of kosher, and the associations with the feelings of Jewishness it stimulates, is also evident at the SUJY. Trying to attract more members, the SUJY organises various events. The invitations are sent out by email and Facebook, and most of the event description is dedicated to the food. Words such as ‘tasty’, ‘delicious’, ‘amazing’, or ‘unforgettable’ accompany ‘kosher’ and ‘authentic’. Almost every invitation promises young Jews an authentic and unforgettable experience and tasting of great kosher food and kosher wine from Israel. In these emphases, it becomes evident that what one eats and with whom plays a very important role in Jewish public events. It is the presence of kosher meals that, for many, adds value to Jewish gatherings. The meals are usually prepared either by the rabbi’s wife or Anna, another orthodox woman living in Bratislava. While sometimes – like during the Pesach Seder – the food might be chosen for its specific meaning, at other times the only thing that matters is that it is kosher. The dinners would always have at least two or three dishes and a dessert, and young Jews would happily toast one another by shouting “L’chaim” (Hebrew for ‘to life’) while
raising glasses of kosher wine, Coca-Cola or mineral water. Eating together at these events seemed to create a sense of Jewishness – though it was prone to weaken when young Jews left the event space and re-entered their everyday lives.

Eliska, a 28-year-old halakhic Jew from an interfaith family, appreciated the environment and possibilities that SUJY events offered. While explaining that the charm of SUJY events is enhanced by “sitting down together and eating kosher”, she was not so selective about her dietary practices outside of publicly Jewish settings. Occasionally, she ate at McDonald’s or chose a traditional Slovak restaurant – though if they were brought to light among the Jewish community, such choices would be frowned upon. The way one talks about what one eats conveys a powerful message, and serves as a means to reaffirm one’s Jewishness within the Jewish context, but also outside of it. Alena, who came from an endogamous family, would often mention that her work colleagues were not good lunch-time company as, according to her, “due to their Slovakness, their favourite place to eat was the Slovak Pub where they went to have halušky.”

While traditional Slovak cuisine was often described by young Jews as “filling, but not interesting, food that was good when people worked on fields to keep them full,” in the way Alena talked about it, it served as a marker of difference between Jews and non-Jews. Thus, the dietary choices young Jews make not only create distinctions among themselves – in terms of whether they eat kosher or not – but also highlight and strengthen the distinctions between Jews and non-Jews.

While eating preferences played an important role in how Jews were perceived by others, it was also crucial for the reinforcement of one’s sense of Jewishness at home. “A long time ago, I decided that I would not mix meat with milk,” Lea proudly explained to me. “When Teodor asked me why, I said, ‘Because I want to remind myself every day who I am. You know it your whole life’. He is from a family where the sense of Jewishness did not get lost at all. He was brought up in a family where they practised traditions.” Making the difference between their upbringings visible, she continued,

---

30 Halušky is a Slovak national dish – potato dumplings with special Slovak bryndza cheese and bacon.
But I said I want to remind myself of it – and he came one day and said ‘I want to do that as well.’ So since then, we do not mix meat and milk on a plate, and we also try to keep some time limits – to the extent we can. I think it is said you need to wait six hours after meat, in order to eat dairy again. But I cannot take as long, as I cannot imagine what I would eat in between. So I keep three hours. Teodor is able to wait four hours. So we keep meat and milk separately, and we do not eat pork.

For many young Jews, such efforts would be compromised as soon as they left the space of home, or the community; and some choose vegetarian diets in order to avoid mixing meat with milk, or limit their observance of dietary rules to the home. Lea and Teodor are more persevering. “Even in restaurants we ask about the presence of milk in meaty dishes. Sometimes they look at us weirdly. Usually it is me asking as a finicky woman whether there is milk or cream in the meal, or something like that. Apart from this we eat everything.” The need to take on the role of a “finicky woman,” however, suggests that even if young Jews try to keep certain traditions to make themselves “feel Jewish,” they do not want their efforts to be visible to the non-Jewish public (a point I will return to in Chapter Three).

**Conclusion**

The strategies undertaken by many Jewish families to shield their children and grandchildren in politically fraught times had ambivalent effects on relationships within the Jewish community. In this chapter, I have shown that the extent to which young Jews feel accepted within the Jewish community, and the ways they are seen by other Jews, depends on their familial histories and descent, as well as on the choices and decisions made by their older kin. The different statuses ascribed to young Jews when they enter Jewish organised life highlight tensions in previous generations surrounding questions of politics, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal. Apart from a need to negotiate their Jewishness in the light of the *Halakhah*, young Jews also face the necessity of navigating a series of other distinctions: being identified as ‘new Jews’, coming from outside Bratislava or from an unknown family, and so on.
This chapter has explored how these distinctions around perceptions of Jewishness – of one’s own as well as of others – are made, maintained and justified in the context of post-Socialist Slovakia. It has highlighted the importance of knowledge – whether it is knowledge of one’s familial background and experience during Socialism, of one’s Jewishness or of Jewish traditions, or knowledge of other people – and its role in creating distinctions. These different kinds of knowledge, whether stemming from one’s upbringing and family traditions (learnt through practice) or from books later in life, serve as the means to create and justify the various statuses attributed to Jews seeking a place in the Jewish community.

Social distinctions in this context are formed on the basis of descent, knowledge, locality, family history and the strategies older generations chose after the Second World War or during Socialism (and also in the years after 1989). The latter creates distinctions communicated in terms of loyalty or betrayal. I have argued that all these distinctions have a productive role in helping people navigate their social relationships and investments of trust in the uncertain context of post-Socialist Slovakia. The boundary-making involved enables Slovak Jews to distinguish between people who are the ‘same’ and can be trusted; it enables them not to only mark who is Jewish or non-Jewish, but also to navigate fragile relationships of trust within a diversified community of people with varied lived experience.

I have argued that young Jews, and especially the ones approaching Jewish communal life after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, feel a desire to learn more about their heritage, but also face the need to negotiate their Jewishness in the light of these distinction-making processes. Further, I have shown that even if the chances of acquiring acceptance and recognition by the Jewish community are slim, young Jews find ways of their own to reinforce their sense of Jewishness. Although the community is perceived as an extension of the home, a ‘safe space’ where Jews feel comfortable claiming their Jewishness openly, the limitations of this framing appear in moments of confrontation that surround distinction-making. The community is an ambivalent space where kinship, religion and politics are intertwined, creating sameness as well as difference, both the sense of belonging and the need to prove it. While the SUJY and community are spaces where knowledge can be acquired, belonging demonstrated, and recognition sought, they are also spaces where often
hurtful conflicts and rejections take place. As a result, young Jews move the processes of strengthening their sense of Jewishness to the sphere of the home – to a space where the dangers of external recognition can be more carefully managed.

The following chapter turns from processes of negotiating Jewishness within the space of the Jewish community and home to exploring how Jewishness is navigated outside these apparent ‘safe spaces’.
Figure 4: synagogue on Heydukova Street

Figure 5: inside of the synagogue on Heydukova Street (a view from the women’s section)
Chapter Three

Negotiating Private and Public Jewishness

It was a warm Wednesday in May. Dressed in long black skirt and smart black jacket, I stood waiting for Klara. We had agreed to meet on Obchodná Street so that we could walk together to the *shul*. When Klara arrived a few minutes later, in blue jeans and a dark blue blazer, she was apologetic: “I didn’t have anything more formal. I think this will be fine.” Upon arriving at the synagogue on Heydukova Street – the only synagogue in Bratislava – we quickly realised that we were the only women attending the *Shavuot* service. For half an hour we sat alone in the women’s section, watching the men try to call someone to complete the *minyan* so the service could start. After several calls and text messages, and a great deal of complaining about men who should be more active in religious life but were absent, an older man living near the *shul* joined the group and the prayer commenced.

After the service ended, a few of us gathered in front of the synagogue for a chat. Most people rushed off to previous engagements, but Klara and I stayed behind to talk to the rabbi. Pleased to see Klara, a halakhic Jew who was discovering her Jewishness, at the service, the rabbi invited us to dinner. It was the first of several dinners at the rabbi’s house, but the only time we accompanied the rabbi on his walk home.31

The synagogue was only a 20 minute walk from the rabbi’s house. After dinner, however, Klara confessed to me that it felt much longer. “I felt really weird. Everyone was watching, staring at us. Did you see?” The rabbi was in his early fifties, and had a long grey beard that he occasionally tucked behind his shirt collar. He usually wore glasses, a black suit with white shirt, a tie, *tzitzit*, and *kippah*. On that day, however, he was wearing a long black silk coat, tied with a black rope around his waist, and a large, round black hat. For people who saw him regularly, it was obvious this was a special occasion, and a lot of care had been devoted to his

31 Whenever she was invited by the rabbi or his wife for dinner – which happened several times during my fieldwork – Klara would ask me whether I wanted to join her, explaining she felt better if she was not alone. She also knew it would enhance my fieldwork.
outfit. As we walked through the city centre, passing small shops and coffee-bars, people passing us or sitting on restaurant terraces could not help but notice “this strange-looking man”, as Klara described him. We talked about Klara’s upcoming trip to Israel to visit her sister, and the rabbi noted that he felt safer in Israel than in Central Europe.

A few minutes after leaving his house, Klara bluntly shared her discomfort. “I couldn’t wait for us to get out of the city centre and into his house,” she admitted. “It’s only now that I’ve realised that it’s one thing to walk with a rabbi in Israel, it’s more or less normal there, but here it’s not.” For Klara, being seen with the rabbi in Bratislava was dangerous. “If you are walking with the rabbi here, you are in for a beating.” Her reflections highlighted a tension many young Jews face: despite the desire to learn more about what it means to be Jewish, and to engage in community activities and events, public Jewishness was seen as dangerous. In spite of Klara’s efforts to learn, perform and “feel more Jewish,” she did not feel safe making her Jewishness publicly visible.

In this chapter, I explore how young Jews navigate their Jewishness outside the ‘safe spaces’ of their home and the Jewish community. As I showed in Chapter Two, many young Jews are trying to learn more about their Jewishness while incorporating Jewish practices into their everyday lives. While they want to challenge their family’s decisions to hide or obscure their heritage, when faced with the unpredictable outside world, many young Jews find some of the strategies their ancestors used helpful. I show how familial upbringing and the transmission of loss, as well as of fear and a sense of insecurity, influence young Jews’ perceptions of the past, present, and future. Exploring their everyday practices of relatedness, and their public and private performances of Jewishness, I argue that the past is powerfully present for young Slovak Jews. This persistence of the past, and of histories of betrayal, generates a chronic sense of insecurity and mistrust that permeates all layers of social life. Many young Jews find comfort in compartmentalising their everyday lives, choosing to guard and conceal their Jewishness by enacting a careful ‘non-otherness’ in the potentially unsafe non-Jewish outside world.
‘Critical events’, according to Veena Das (1995, 2007), have significant consequences for the lives of their survivors as these events continue to permeate the fabric of the everyday. I draw on her work to show that the Shoah was just such a critical event. Although the Shoah was of the past, in relation to ‘physical time’, for Slovak Jews – and especially the young generation – it does not have a complete sense of ‘pastness’ around it (Das 2007: 97; cf. Hirsch 2008). Everyday experiences of palpable insecurity and potential danger create a sensation of time-stopping, in which the ‘phenomenal time’ of the Shoah persists in the present, affecting imaginations of the future.

The Shoah has had an enormous effect on the Jewish community – not only because it decimated its population, but also because familial experiences and memories of this catastrophe continue to impact on the everyday lives of people who survived it, their children and grandchildren (see Hirsch 2008, Kidron 2009, Feuchtwang 2005, 2011; Climo 1995; Lambek and Antze 1996; Pine et al. 2004; Hoffman 2004). The sense of loss survivors experienced at the death of large parts of their families, as Stephan Feuchtwang (2011) has argued, is often transmitted across generations, in vicarious ‘postmemory’ (see also Carsten 2007a). I argue that what is being transmitted among Slovak Jews is not only a sense of loss or incompleteness, but also fear and insecurity. This transmission of fear, I suggest, is rooted in histories and memories of betrayal by non-Jewish neighbours and friends – both during the war, and during the highly-surveilled Socialist era.

As the dangers of betrayal are ever-present, and saturate even the intimate sphere of relatedness (see Thiranagama and Kelly 2010; Thiranagama 2010; Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016; Feuchtwang 2010; Geschiere 1997, 2013), the fragility of trust is emphasised among young Jews and their older kin. In this context of mistrust and uncertainty, I show the productive dimensions of secrecy (see Simmel 1906; Jones 2014) in enabling Slovak Jews to take control over the (in)visibility of their Jewishness – by managing their bodies and performances across the boundaries of different publics and privates. These forms of management enable compartmentalisation on the level of the everyday, allowing young Jews to navigate or control what may become known or visible in particular spaces and to certain audiences (see Das 2007; Brink-Danan 2011, 2012; Levy 1997; Sözer 2014).
Taken together, these arguments show how young Jews perceive antisemitism in Slovakia, and how they deal with uncertainty and insecurity in their everyday lives. I explore the processes of making and maintaining boundaries around ‘safe spaces’, as undertaken by both young Jews and their older kin. Reflecting on the issues that arise when crossing this boundary, I show how the house and body become important sources of identification, and potential markers of ‘otherness’ that need to be carefully guarded. I discuss how both the visual and verbal risks of “betraying oneself” are portrayed, and how they are contained while moving between Jewish and non-Jewish space. I argue that, despite their efforts to be more observant and less fearful of non-Jewish others, young Jews often end up choosing the same strategies of ‘careful concealment’ that their older kin chose – enabling them to conceal difference and sustain secrecy in the ‘non-Jewish public’.

**Dealing with uncertainty and insecurity**

On 16\(^{th}\) March, 2013, a group of neo-Nazi extremists and supporters of the Slovak State gathered in front of the Presidential Palace. From there, they planned to march through the streets of Bratislava to the Martinský Cemetery, where Jozef Tiso – the president of the wartime Slovak State – is buried. Their aim was to commemorate the memory of “the only true Slovak State and its only true President Jozef Tiso.” Their march was due to cross the Square of the Slovak National Uprising – a place symbolising and commemorating the efforts of Slovak partisans in 1944-1945, who fought against the fascist rule of the Slovak State and later the Nazi regime – and a counter-protest gathered there intending to block the street and thus stop the group of extremists from proceeding to the cemetery. “I am going to the protest,” Eugen, a Holocaust survivor, told me, apologising for cutting our meeting short. “May I come with you?” I asked. Surprised that “someone so young would want to go,” he gladly agreed. As Eugen had trouble walking, supporting himself with a cane, we took a tram to Obchodná Street and walked slowly down to the square. Dozens of people had already arrived, and patiently awaited the marching group.
“I am glad you came too, it is very important to show that we do not agree with such behaviour and it should not be allowed,” Eugen said as we waited in the cold, moving around a little to keep ourselves warm. The whole event was under police watch. Among the protesters in the square, policemen wore their regular uniforms; but the police forces guarding the march of extremists were heavily armed, and joined by special soldiers. Waiting for the extremists to arrive, I could see that there were only a very few familiar faces in the crowd who had decided to join the protest. In the end, the pending confrontation was avoided when the police redirected the route of the march via other streets.

The reactions of young Jews when I told them about my participation in the protest highlighted their fears of antisemitism, and their desire to avoid confrontation. “How would my presence there help?” Oliver asked, arguing that “the town should not even allow such people to march publicly through the streets. They are just acknowledging them and legitimising what they do.” By comparison, many Jews from the older generations who had personally experienced antisemitism during the Second World War or Socialism, argued for the importance of confrontation. Bartolomej, a 60 year old halakhic Jew, was one of the few I recognised from the Jewish Congregation at the protest. We met regularly at various community events and every Wednesday at the rabbi’s Torah reading session. When I asked him about antisemitism in Slovakia, he made clear that the conditions were far from ideal, but he was “not yet panicking.”

Over the course of my fieldwork, several political events occurred that concerned many of the Jews I knew. One of them was the speech delivered by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico on 26th February, 2013, marking the 150th anniversary of the Matica Slovenská – the Slovak cultural and educational institution based in Martin. The Prime Minister asserted that “The Slovak independent state was not established for minorities,” arguing that minority groups, such as Roma, homosexuals, groups with different opinions or ethnic minorities were demanding too many rights from the state, without fostering any patriotic feeling. According to the SME, one of the main Slovak daily newspapers, the speech was directed mainly against the Hungarian minority living in the southern areas of Slovakia, and homosexuals (see Piško 2013; Jesenský 2013a). But during his speech, the Prime
Minister had made sure to mention several minorities specifically, demanding “that blackmailing with minority rights should stop. It does not matter whether it is the minority of Roma, people of a different orientation, people having different opinions, or ethnic minorities”. He created a moral distinction between ‘the good majority of Slovak citizens’ and ‘others’ (members of these minorities), and emphasised that the state had been established for the former – the “slovenský štátovorný národ (Slovak state-forming nation)”.

“It has become customary that from minorities living in Slovakia we see mainly požadovačnosť [a Slovak word for demanding or asking for much, a term stressing a negative character], but no sense of responsibility to the state. We see grasping hands, but almost no nurturing of civic virtues in return. This has to change,” Fico argued, calling on the Matica Slovenská to guard and cultivate patriotism and nationalism amongst young people. He insisted that the institution “must work on developing important spiritual and national traditions,” while reminding people that “a lack of patriotism leads to irruptions of extremism.” The speech was controversial, especially among the press and representatives of the main Slovak minority groups – including the Jewish minority. Other groups that officially reacted against the Prime Minister’s speech included representatives of the Roma, Hungarian, Polish and Czech minorities living in Slovakia, and the Slovak Council of Christians and Jews.

When I asked Bartolomej what he thought about the speech, he said, “Obviously we cannot say that there is no antisemitism in Slovakia. We know it is present. It might not be as visible as it was between the wars, but it is here.” A person needs to choose their friends and acquaintances carefully, he said, adding, “I do not feel antisemitism among my friends; when I did feel they were starting to be anti-Jewish, we simply stopped being friends.”

The concerns that surfaced after the speech touched on sensitive issues of loyalty, belonging and recognition – or rather their instability or scarcity – historically bound up in the socio-political life of the Jewish minority in East-Central Europe. These questions were especially prominent in the context of nation-building following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when Jews were accused of ‘Magyarization’ and seen as ambiguous citizens whose loyalty was questionable (see
Klein-Pešová 2009, 2012; Salner 2000). Almost a century later, Slovak Jews continue to be reminded of their ‘otherness’. This persistent othering, as Bartolomej’s comment above illustrates, generates mistrust and a sense of insecurity – particularly in the light of past and potential betrayal (see Thiranagama and Kelly 2010) – that affects Jewish relationships within and beyond the community deeply.

Another significant political event that intensified these concerns among the Jewish community came later in November 2013 with the regional elections, when Marian Kotleba – a man known for his pro-fascist orientation and for denying the Holocaust – was elected as a governor for the Banská Bystrica region.32 Many Jews called his election a “catastrophe”; but others, like Bartolomej, were more sceptical. “The elections in Banská Bystrica made me worried of course. He is an ultra-right politician and a fascist! If he wants to stay in politics, however, he will need to stop all the things he was doing,” Bartolomej reasoned. He added, “I am not scared that fascism will take over Slovak politics again. With a friend of mine, we agreed immediately after the revolution that if any of us feels that it is time to run away, we will call and warn each other. It has not yet come to that.” While the older generations were moderately worried, and carefully followed the election process and the news, young Jews articulated more fear and panic.33

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that young Jews saw the danger of antisemitism as something more tangible than the older generations. Their lower tolerance for risk was, to an extent, a result of them having heard horrible stories but – in contrast to their older kin – not having lived through worse scenarios than they were seeing. They attentively followed what people said, paying careful attention to the subtext, and discussed the news and political situation regularly. The assertion that “the situation now is very similar to the conditions preceding the Second World War” was frequently made. The events in November, however, elevated this sense of insecurity and, for many, created a need to think about strategies of dealing with potential dangers.

32 As discussed in the Introduction to the thesis, in March 2016, Kotleba’s political party LSNS gained eight percent of votes in the parliamentary elections, and won ten percent of seats in the Slovak parliament. These results heightened the level of concern among the whole Jewish community.
33 For those who remember “the situation in the 1990s, when physical attacks were more common,” as Bartolomej noted, the conditions now are better; but what worries many is the rise of political violence in other European countries, especially whether Hungary or France.
On the morning of 10th November, 2013, I was waiting in front of my flat for Alena, who was meant to pick me up after collecting Oliver and Fero. It was Mitzvah Day, and the SUJY and JRC had jointly organised an event to clean the Jewish Orthodox cemetery. When they arrived, Alena greeted me by asking whether I had heard the news. It was the morning after the regional elections, and the results showed that Marián Kotleba had won enough votes to proceed to the second round in the Banská Bystrica region. Oliver and Fero, sitting in the back of the car, started angrily explaining what had happened, talking over one another. Expressing their disappointment, all three of them predicted very bad times to come. “It’s similar to the years preceding the Shoah!” Oliver claimed. “It shows a lot that even the region where the Slovak National Uprising started has now elected a person who denies the Holocaust and dresses up in the uniform of Hlinka’s National Guard,” Alena sadly agreed.

During the weeks preceding the second round of the elections, which was held on 23rd November, young Jews engaged in long conversations about the probability of Kotleba winning the elections, and what this would mean for the region, the country and its minorities. “Those of us who have experienced racial discrimination, persecution, and have had our families moulded by the Holocaust, we contemplate these things differently than those who have not,” Oliver argued, contrasting the Jewish minority with the Slovak majority. “Most non-Jews don’t understand. They don’t think what it might cause… I must look at these things differently than a person living in Banská Bystrica,” Oliver explained. “He might dislike Gypsies, but I must be pragmatic because I know what happened to us. So I need to think about the way we would avoid this. But he will not even think of it.”

The elections were impatiently awaited and talked about with deep concern.

On 24th November, the atmosphere changed. Kotleba had won the regional elections in Banská Bystrica. Discussions were silenced by the puzzling realisation that a person with such opinions had succeeded. “It is not de facto antisemitism, but it shows that people like the ideas of fascism or Nazism,” Oliver asserted when we met after the elections. “At first it will be Roma people, then of course us. They will not solve the Roma question and then they will look for another enemy. That’s how it works.” Contrasting themselves to the Slovak majority, Jews often compared their
situation to other minorities, especially Roma, observing the public discourse to assess the situation. For Oliver, like many other young Jews, these elections represented “a threat also outside of the Banská Bystrica region. If such a person were a candidate in other regions, maybe apart from Western Slovakia because we do not have such problems with the Roma, he would certainly win.” Many people in the Jewish community were disappointed by the results of the elections. Several, especially young Jews, started to talk about leaving the country, often in contrast to the older generations who did not expect Kotleba to have much power over the rest of Slovakia.

“Finding out the results, at home, we all started to talk about leaving the country,” Oliver admitted. “It was a troubling sign for all of us. I came up with an idea to buy a flat or house in Austria and, in case of an emergency, to sell everything here and leave. Because you never know, and when it’s actually happening it might be too late.” Fear had affected his whole family, and discussions about dealing with growing insecurity became everyday topics. “My mother, however, pointed out that there is also antisemitism in Austria, although it is not politically legalised or obvious. She argues that a better place to go would be the Netherlands or England. We are considering it.” For Oliver and his family, the situation was “already rather serious.” “Just think that more than 71,000 people voted for him – and that is only one region,” Oliver explained. “You see, this is exactly how a person thinks. Those people did not even think about what it might cause, they did not have a reason, but Jews must think this way because it is historically given. We must be cautious.”

While Oliver’s family had experienced several “expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment” – including verbal assaults, having the tires on their car punctured and excrement smeared on their doorbell – it was the results of the regional elections that made them consider leaving the country for the first time. They were not alone. Peter, a young non-halakhic Jew, decided that if the situation got worse, he would leave the country without waiting for further signs. “I told my fiancée that I will leave, whether she will go with me or not. I will not stay here and wait to see what happens as our ancestors did.” Many young Jews who pondered the idea of looking for a safer place to live argued that they needed to react to the socio-political situation differently than their ancestors. “They stayed put, waiting to see, maybe
hoping it would get better, but they ended up in concentration camps. We cannot wait,” Peter argued. For young Jews, like Oliver and Peter, planning to deal with potential danger was important, enabling them to navigate their fears in the light of the past. Others, however, realised there were not many places to go where they would feel safer.

“I was horrified by the results of elections. My father was totally petrified and outraged. Even the first round was alarming,” Alena admitted. “I told myself that the only thing missing is if he gets to parliament, and then I am packing my bags and leaving,” she told me. Alena continued,

But what would that solve? I leave my home only to get away from Kotleba, and go to Austria and there will be another ‘Kotleba’. What then? Will I go to Germany, and from there to France? It has always been the way that Jews were blamed for things not going well and we bend our heads and leave… I do not think that leaving is the solution. Just because in some other country antisemitism is not as visible as here, it does not mean it is not present there too.

She added that she found it worse not knowing where the danger might come from. “Fortunately, I have never experienced any antisemitic attack myself, but it is obvious that antisemitism is strong in Slovakia. For me, however, I think that it is much worse when the source is invisible,” she explained. “The one you see and expect, you can prepare for, but it’s more frightening when you do not see it and suddenly it appears and shocks you. In Slovakia we have the kind of antisemitism which you can feel but not really see that clearly.” Because Kotleba had become a public figure, for Alena, he did not represent a threat to the same extent as he had before. His visibility created an assurance for her that his actions would be controlled. “The worst ones are those who keep their antisemitism in secret and then it erupts without any warning. We know about Kotleba now – that we should be careful and watch what he’s doing. Sadly he got to the position he did,” she said. “I fear more, however, that there’s someone we don’t know about at all, and that one day he’ll be somewhere we wouldn’t want him to be. Kotleba is not a good person, denying the Shoah and swearing at Jews and Roma, but the evil will probably come from the silent invisible ones.”
Many young Jews felt that the results of the elections demonstrated the unpopularity of Jews and Roma, and other minority groups, among the Slovak majority. “People do not like Jews very much when they elect a person who denies the Holocaust,” Alena stressed, “but I believe that Slovaks have it hard because it’s a waste of breath to talk about freedom of speech or religion and democratic principles here.” I was puzzled by this statement, until she elaborated,

The reality is that if I wear a cross on my neck it is socially acceptable, even welcomed. If I, however, in the same conditions, wear a Star of David on my neck, the same people will not look at the cross and star in the same way. So for me it is the way that we are pretending, but it is not so simple. Jews will probably never have it easy – they will never be finally accepted and people will never let them just be. Not in these conditions. Thank God we have a state where it is possible – the State of Israel. Or probably also the very large communities, such as the ones in Brooklyn, which you will not leave. You can live your whole life among your people and no one cares about you being different – being Jewish.

Alena’s sense of otherness, and her longing to escape it, were common among her Jewish friends and agemates. “No matter what we would like to think, this state is not secular. Religion is still present in public life. Just look at all those Christian holy days that state recognises as official work holidays,” she added. Noting that the state recognises Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter Monday, the Day of Our Lady of Sorrows, All Saint’s Day and Christmas Day as national dni pracovného pokoja (Bank holidays), Alena asked, “how is this possible, when we are not supposed to have any state religious ideology?” Many young Jews, such as Alena, perceived Slovakia as a Christian, often Roman-Catholic, state.34 “It’s clear,” she added, “we live in a Christian space,” while emphasising that she “identif[ied] as a Jew living in Slovakia.”

The feeling of being ‘other’ in a country they perceived as Christian was a source of constant uncertainty among young Jews, and underpinned their need to be cautious. “You do keep your eyes open and listen what people say – just that maybe they will mention something anti-Jewish to warn you.” According to Barbora,

34 During my fieldwork, I observed that there was a difference between young Jews’ perceptions of Catholics and Protestants. As the wartime Slovak State was led by President Jozef Tiso, a Roman Catholic priest, Jews empathised with Protestants to an extent, and essentially considered them another minority group.
antisemitism in Slovakia is present both in a latent way, and also in more visible manifestations that occur from time to time. The elections were for many a proof of this. Young people would often mention cases of physical violence that had happened mostly in the 1990s and 2000s to justify their sense of insecurity. “The rabbi was beaten twice already,” Oliver pointed out during one of our dinners. Klara added, “And Gregor was attacked only because he looks visibly Jewish. One must be careful not to show off Jewishness.” As Stela told me, “A police watch moves in a radius around the rabbi’s house and his route to the synagogue to provide protection if needed, they even come by the Jewish community centre to ask whether everything is okay when there is a Seder.” For many young Slovak Jews, feeling the presence of the past, insecurity surrounding their Jewishness is a part of their everyday lives. Perhaps paradoxically, the more they try to be careful, the more they pay attention to things that make them worry.

However silent the transmission of loss might have been, familial experiences and memories of the Shoah – and often also persecutions of the Socialist regime – are incorporated into the fabric of the everyday (see Das 1995, 2007; Feuchtwang 2011; Kidron 2009; Hirsch 2008), creating a lens through which the present, the past and the future are perceived and interpreted. Alongside loss and incompleteness, as I have shown, the older generations of Slovak Jews transmitted also fear, uncertainty and insecurity, and a need for carefulness. These sensibilities in turn, and the ways in which they were transmitted, intensified young Jews’ perceptions of the present dangers of antisemitism, making them seem more tangible. In the light of these concerns, the following two sections look at how Jewishness is navigated in non-Jewish spaces and along their borders with the ‘safe spaces’ of home and community.

The politics of visibility: The boundary of the ‘safe space’

“You can’t just let all your neighbours know you’re Jewish.”

– Alena on the necessity to veil the otherness
The doorpost of the house: A mezuzah

When Alena, a halakhic Jew from Eastern Slovakia, moved to Bratislava for work, she found a nice small flat she could afford to live in on her own. “I feel too old to live with someone else,” she explained. “This is a place where I want to create a new home.” She brought with her a mezuzah – a small object consisting of a casing with an inscribed parchment with text from Deuteronomy (Wright 2012; Brink-Danan 2011) – that her grandmother had kept in her house. Apart from an Israeli flag and some Jewish-themed magnets and postcards, the mezuzah was the only thing in the flat she described as ‘Jewish’. It was carefully attached to the frame of the kitchen door. “I had to glue it there, because I didn’t want to damage it – it’s old,” she explained. Touching it gently with her fingertips, she added, “The scroll might be deteriorated, but for me it’s invaluable. It makes me feel as if I am continuing something my ancestors began.” When I asked whether she had considered attaching it to the front door frame, as the custom is, she quickly responded, “Can you imagine doing that?”, knocking her index finger against her forehead to let me know that that would not be a wise idea. “You can’t just let all your neighbours know you’re Jewish. Think of all the people who might come in. No. You just cannot do that.” Hung on a doorframe, a mezuzah is believed to offer protection for a Jewish home. But for Slovak Jews, such a visible marking of their Jewishness engendered risk of antisemitism, and as such was a potential source of danger.

During my fieldwork, I visited many households – some regularly, some for scheduled interviews. There were only two front doors on which I saw a mezuzah attached to the frame. One was at the rabbi’s house; the other was at the home of Lea and Teodor who lived in a newly built neighbourhood outside town, in a four-flat building. When I was invited to visit Lea at home, I did not expect to see the small metal box containing a parchment scroll with an inscription of the prayer Shema Yisrael attached proudly on the front doorframe of their flat. Astonished to see a mezuzah in such a visible place, I mentioned its uniqueness in the region to Lea. She smiled and said, “It was not a simple decision.” Lea and Teodor decided they would like to raise their children to be proud of their Jewishness, without a need to hide it –
in contrast to their own upbringing (discussed in Chapter Six). “The whole mezuzah issue was a dilemma,” Teodor later told me. “We were scared about the reactions of the neighbours and their visitors. But we decided to put it there anyway.” The courage and motivation this couple demonstrated was rare. What helped them, however, was also their belief that the non-Jewish public lacks the knowledge necessary to associate this small object with Judaism. “I think that not many people actually know what it is, probably no one, apart from Jews, could even guess,” Teodor said. “But still, you never know.” For them, the mezuzah represented more than religious affiliation: by displaying it in uncertain, non-Jewish space, they hoped to create a sense of pride for their children, and to oppose the state of fear and insecurity they lived with. This demonstration, although within a space which only a few neighbours could see, was an attempt to extend the ‘safe space’ of the home into the indeterminate public space beyond the door, testing and stretching the boundaries between safe, private space and dangerous, public spaces.

Figure 6: Alena’s mezuzah on a doorframe
The window of the house: A Christmas tree

As we saw in Chapter One, many Jewish families put a lot of effort into keeping their Jewishness secret, often even from their closest kin. As Klara’s mother Veronika said, “one could not really trust anyone”, neither neighbours nor friends, especially during the years of the Socialist regime. Besides hiding any signs of Jewishness, many people tried to go further, and consciously displayed visible markers that were supposed to demonstrate they were “just like everyone else.” As Veronika put it, “We lived normal lives like everyone else – we were normal.”

Many young Jews grew up in homes where their parents and grandparents decorated a Christmas tree every year at Christmas time, and placed it directly in the window for passers-by to see it from the street (see previous chapter). “It was done for appearance’s sake,” Dagmar’s mother admitted, “for neighbours but also friends visiting, especially my daughter’s schoolmates, to see that we were not different.” The aspect of placing the Christmas tree near the window, its visibility, appeared very often and shed light on how the demonstration of ‘sameness’ or rather ‘non-otherness’ was important. As Samuel recalled, “We always had the tree placed right by the window in the living room. For everyone to see. Whether our visitors or just people on the street.” Under Socialism, as many older Jews would often remind me, relationships of trust were fragile. “One could not know whom to trust. Your neighbours could have been telling on you to the Secret Police (ŠtB), or even be the [undercover] agents set to follow you,” Veronika said. The inability to completely trust or rely on someone, and the need to be careful, often led Jews to keep their Jewishness private in front of neighbours and friends.

When they felt unable to display such visibly Christian symbols, many people found different ways to conceal their Jewish descent. Upon finding out about her Jewishness, as described in Chapter One, Alena persuaded her parents that there was no need to have Christmas anymore, and encouraged them to celebrate Jewish holidays instead. When this happened, however, Alena noticed that her mother stopped inviting her friends over for visits during Christmas time. “She did not want them to know we did not celebrate.” Letting people know about one’s Jewishness put
one’s social relations, and the trust that underpinned them, at risk. Many Jews preferred to avoid that risk.

Many years after the Velvet Revolution, and despite their re-entering the Jewish community, Klara’s family still takes out their Christmas tree from the garage every year. In order to live what Veronika called a “normal life”, they still celebrated most Christian traditions. As well as decorating their house with painted Easter eggs, celebrating Christmas and having a tall, colourful Christmas tree had become a family tradition. “Every year we take the tree out of the garage, but we only have an artificial plastic one. It’s ready there in the box, we just need to take it to the living room, spread out its branches and make their needles fluffy,” Klara explained to me, contrasting the ease of putting up the artificial tree to the effort required to buy a fresh tree every year. “We just decorate it, add some glass balls on it and that’s it… ready for visitors to come.” In the last few years, Klara admitted, the Christmas tree was decorated only for visitors. “In case anyone comes to visit. So they would not ask questions.” During the winter towards the end of my fieldwork, however, Klara’s mother Veronika said that for the first time, they were thinking about not putting up the tree. Twenty-five years after the Velvet Revolution, with their children already in their late thirties and early forties, the possibility of not decorating a Christmas tree was still subject to debate and uncertainty.

While a mezuzah, if present at all, was often hidden in order to conceal one’s Jewishness, a Christmas tree was placed directly in the window to make one’s pretended ‘sameness’ visible to everyone. Both these efforts demonstrate strategies Slovak Jews have used to veil their ‘otherness’ in the eyes of non-Jews, and highlight how the house becomes a powerful medium and marker of the boundaries surrounding ‘safe spaces’. The body of an individual moving through space marks boundaries in similar ways.

The body and Jewishness

Having observed how Slovak Jews strove to conceal their Jewishness in public, and wearing kippot or payot that visibly mark Jewish men in communities around the
world (see Heilman 2000; Fader 2009; Benor 2012) outside of the house or JCC was out of the question (with an exception of a very few practicing individuals), I focused on different articles and ways that people used to display their Jewishness. During one of my visits to Klara’s home, I stayed in the kitchen and chatted with her mother Veronika. I voiced my admiration of her Shabbat candlesticks, and she quickly explained that they were a gift, displayed in the kitchen because “they are not very obvious.” When I asked whether she ever wore jewellery with any Jewish symbols, such as the chai (Hebrew for ‘life’), as her daughter does, she answered simply, “No.” Reconsidering a moment, she explained her reluctance in terms of a sense of insecurity and fear that was “a part of who I am. It is within me. Maybe it’s our generation, but we don’t want anyone to know this about us. I feel it’s still not safe. There are some nice things, but I never wore any symbols, not even on jewellery.”

The everyday worry about non-Jews finding out about her background was deeply intertwined with Jewishness for Veronika. She understood her Jewishness as a part of her that was meant to stay guarded and carefully hidden, appearing occasionally only within the ‘safe space’ of home or, rarely, in the Jewish community. “But I do have a Fatima hand!” she said proudly, smiling. “But only on a key chain – so it’s not really visible.” The hamsa (also known as hamesh hand or the hand of Fatima), which Klara brought Veronika from Israel, provided Veronika with a way to express her Jewishness and yet keep it hidden. “I have that, but it’s more general, common for many religions, so it’s not directly related to Judaism, and I wear it in a pocket or a handbag, so no one really sees it anyway.”

Although Veronika, like many Jews from the older generations, wanted to hide her own Jewishness, she admired her daughter’s courage to wear the chai pendant on her necklace. At the same time, she worried about her daughter’s safety. “I like that she can do it. I couldn’t. And it’s not safe. It’s better when people don’t know that you’re Jewish. It is better when no one knows about you,” she repeated, gazing into my eyes. “The young ones are maybe less afraid, but it’s not good.” She added, “One day we were invited to the rabbi’s house for dinner, and walking there I had a very bad feeling. The only thing I could think of was that I hope none of our

35 The symbol of hamsa could be occasionally seen in jewellery shops in Bratislava. It is believed to serve as a protection against the evil eye – a condition caused by envious or malevolent people which is also known among the Slovak majority.
friends or colleagues will see us entering his house.” Resting back against the chair, she continued, “What can you do? It’s still within me.” During the Shoah, survivors experienced a loss of existential and physical security that continues to permeate into the present, and effect also their descendants. For Veronika, the fear about someone finding out about her Jewishness was embodied.

While the assumed neutrality of a hamsa key chain enabled Veronika to express her Jewishness and simultaneously to keep it veiled from everyone non-Jewish, her body and its locality became a visible marker of identification. Someone seeing her enter a Jewish space – the rabbi’s house – would, she felt, impair the image of ‘non-otherness’ she had diligently created and carefully guarded in decorating her house or choosing her jewellery. Veronika’s concern echoed the discomfort of her daughter Klara while walking with the rabbi through the city centre. Although Klara would not necessarily feel insecure going into the rabbi’s house, for her the difficulty arose in making her Jewishness so visible when moving through non-Jewish space with a visibly Jewish person – the rabbi.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed Klara’s growing fondness for jewellery with various pendants, each with small hints of her Jewishness. Two of her favourite pendants were a subtle gold chai pendant and a blue hamsa. She wore these “symbols of Jewishness” often, and enjoyed changing their colours and shapes to fit her outfits. With time, she found an Israeli shop online where she could buy most of her jewellery. “I feel good wearing the chai, less so however the Star of David,” Klara admitted, elaborating, “I have the clean star too but I don’t like wearing it. I prefer the ones that are part of a bigger collage – kind of camouflaged.” When I asked why, she explained, as if it were obvious: “Just to be sure – as a precaution, so it wouldn’t be so visible.” While she wore the chai pendant also to work, anything that had the Star of David on it was worn only to events within the Jewish community.

Although people from the older generations often perceived young Jews as being courageous for wearing Jewish symbols, no matter how unsafe they thought doing so might be, for some young Jews who wore them there was a limit to how visible they wanted these symbols to be to the ‘non-Jewish public’. I came to notice
that the audience for such gestures mattered at one event early in my fieldwork, and continued to observe similar considerations being made among many young Jews throughout my stay in Bratislava.

At an early spring shabbaton – a bi-monthly Shabbat dining event organised by the SUJY – I was struck by Samuel’s carefulness in this regard. As he entered the building, with one quick, careful movement he reached under his sweater, took out a necklace with a pendant in shape of the Star of David, and slowly placed it on the top, making it visible. This gesture on its own quickly escaped my mind, until the moment when we were leaving together. Just before exiting the building, already wearing a winter jacket and a shawl, Samuel stopped and slowly put the pendant back under his sweater. It was the attention and care he took to display and then to hide this small object that shed light on how layers of clothes can veil one’s identification with Jewishness, helping young Jews to make it visible to an audience of their choosing, and simultaneously drawing the boundaries of the spaces where they felt comfortable being visibly Jewish.

“I used to wear a thin necklace with the Star of David and also a chai pendant – but not during the summer because that would be visible, only in winter under a sweater or a blouse. I felt like I better not show it,” Dagmar explained when I had mentioned that most Jews I knew only seemed to wear Jewish symbols in ‘Jewish spaces’ or their homes. “Even in the 1990s, we still didn’t express our Jewishness publicly. Only when we went to SUJY seminars, then the whole hotel would know about us. But people didn’t show it on an individual level.” Dagmar felt that displaying Jewishness in such a fashion was unsafe, and insisted she would not share her Jewish descent openly in public. “Especially not when I have a family now – that would involve risks.”

For Dagmar, like Samuel and many other young Jews, layers of clothes offered ways to create a separate space where they could express their Jewishness by wearing any symbol they liked without unveiling their identification to the public. Their practices of choosing where to display their Jewishness, if at all, were informed by feelings of fear and insecurity surrounding issues of visibility and the risks of information about their Jewishness reaching the surface. While Dagmar’s decision as to whether it was safe to wear a Jewish symbol was influenced by the seasonal
weather and temperatures, where an outside layer was needed for her to feel comfortable wearing a pendant with the Star of David, this brought to light a parallel to behaviour she could not understand herself. The way she navigated the visibility of her Jewishness to some extent resembles the strategies used by her grandmother, who covered her concentration camp serial number tattoo during winter by wearing long sleeves, and when the temperatures rose by putting a plaster over it (discussed in Chapter One). Although Dagmar would still perceive her grandmother’s behaviour with puzzlement, her own actions were, possibly unconsciously – deploying strategies of ‘careful concealment’ in similar ways.

The practices and choices of some people, however, also highlighted a different and equally important factor in their decisions: the degree to which particular audiences might know or understand what those symbols represented. “I wear a chai almost every day,” Alena said when I complimented her necklace. “It was a gift from my grandmother, it means a lot to me.” For Alena, as she recalled, “it all started when I came back from a taglit trip to Israel.” A taglit, for young Jews, was a strong emotional experience that strengthened their identification with their Jewish roots. While for most people these intensified feelings were temporary, the impact the experience had on Alena was more lasting. Upon her return, Alena started to wear a Star of David pendant. “It was very small, but I felt stronger wearing it,” she said. Her parents, however, did not appreciate her choice. “I wore it for a few weeks, but my mother took it away from me saying, ‘What if it lets people know you are Jewish – what if you betray yourself somewhere because of this?’ She argued something bad would happen to me. She was very scared.” Despite raising their daughter to be proud of her Jewishness, for Alena’s parents, her wearing a visible sign of her Jewish-specific ‘otherness’ crossed a line and exposed her to an unsafe, dangerous and discriminatory environment.

“Although I tried to fight against their worries, saying ‘let everyone think whatever they want’, I soon understood they were right,” Alena explained. She added,

Imagine just wearing a top with a lower neckline and approaching a new group of people, or a new boss at work – they would stare straight at my neck and, seeing the star, they would not listen to anything anymore. I would be ‘that Jewess’ for them. It is not that I do not want to distinguish myself, I just
don’t want to show something that is so intimate for me – something I am not yet certain that everyone should know about me. I don’t ask people whether they are Christian, or whether they are Roman Catholic or Orthodox.

The *chai* pendant, however, offered Alena a certain level of vagueness that the Star of David did not. “I can wear the *chai* and I feel okay with it because it is not obviously Jewish. It looks like a Taurus sign anyway.” This explicit vagueness to an unknowledgeable eye – whether in terms of its perceived resemblance to a zodiac sign, or the simple uncertainty of its meaning – empowered many young Jews, like Alena and Klara, to express their Jewishness in this way. They were able to wear a *chai* in non-Jewish spaces, while still making themselves visible as Jews to other Jews. The assumed lack of knowledge on the part of non-Jews created the needed sense of comfort.

At the same time, some young Jews who assumed this lack of knowledge on the part of non-Jews sometimes did not possess complete knowledge surrounding the symbol themselves. At various moments during my fieldwork, I noticed that Alena wore her *chai* pendant back to front. Sometimes it would read, as it should in Hebrew, from right to left; other times, it was turned the other way around. One day I asked Alena whether I could take a photograph of her *chai* pendant. “Of course,” she said, taking it off her neck. As I admired it in my hand and put it on the table, she quickly said, “But it needs to be this way up,” and turned it upside down. When I carefully asked why she thought it was supposed to be worn that side up and enquired whether it was important, she admitted, “I didn’t know before, and wore it whichever way I put it on in the morning, but Eliska told me it should be this way.” Neither Alena nor Eliska could read Hebrew. Despite unknowingly wearing the pendant in reverse, for Alena it did not matter which way the pendant was facing. Her own lack of knowledge did not change the meaning she attributed to the act of wearing the *chai* in the first place. It was the reality of wearing it that was important, not the way it was worn. For many young Jews, the act of wearing a Jewish symbol became a performance of their Jewishness.
Oliver, a young halakhic Jew from Bratislava, often argued that wearing Jewish symbols like the Star of David did not make someone Jewish when they were not Jewish according to the Halakhah. “Will I become a Christian if I put a cross on my neck?” he asked jokingly, and added, “It’s just a piece of jewellery.” As we became friends over the course of my fieldwork, it soon became obvious that more lay behind his dislike of wearing visible Jewish symbols: it was the explicitly dehumanising effect of the legal order to wear the Star of David on one’s clothes during the Second World War that his family had had to obey. The other reason was the more recent, or rather persistent, sense of insecurity surrounding symbols which could easily betray one’s Jewishness and thus expose Jews to potential danger.

When I once asked him whether he ever wore any Jewish symbols, he asked, “You mean outside, in front of everyone?” For Oliver, wearing tzitzit was unacceptable, and he took off his kippah and folded it to put it into his pocket every time he left the shul or the community centre. “The only thing I ever wore in public is this ring,” he admitted, letting me look at it. “It is the Shema Yisrael – the confession of faith. It is the most important thing, simply a mitzvah. You need to say it twice a day,” he said, explaining the engraving on the ring’s outer side. “I bought it on a trip to Prague once with my brother, as a souvenir. He got one as well.” Both of them wore the rings every day, though they hid all other material objects that could make their Jewishness visible. When I asked how he felt about wearing the ring in public, he quickly said, “Oh, I am not afraid to wear this. Not many people can
actually tell what it is. To most, I think, it looks like something from the Lord of the Rings.”

The way Oliver, Alena and Klara found security in these objects sheds light on how, for many young Jews, an assumed lack of specific knowledge creates a new sort of ‘safe space’. Wearing such objects allows them to negotiate their sense of insecurity outside the ‘safe spaces’ of home and the Jewish community, while expressing their Jewishness visibly in a way that feels safe. While such demonstrations may take publicly visible forms, they are still guarded and, in a way, concealed behind the lack of knowledge of the uninformed observer.

Of course, navigating Jewishness across boundaries between safe spaces was not simply a matter of controlling visual display and visibility. In the next section, I turn to the ways in which young Slovak Jews navigate Jewishness in non-Jewish spaces verbally.

**Sharing the knowledge?**

“Learning this information changes everything, you cannot unlearn it.”

– Alena on the implications of knowing

**Familial transmission of fear**

It is estimated that during the Second World War, around 80 percent of the Slovak Jewish population perished (Salner 2000). The socio-political situation during the
years preceding the *Shoah* and the role the Slovak State played in the deportations of its Jewish population have influenced the way Slovak Jews relate to the Slovak majority and the Slovak Republic as a country. The laws limiting Jews’ freedoms, rights and social status were harsher than those in Germany, and the process of ‘Aryanisation’, in which their property was expropriated, deliberately produced a sense of dehumanisation. The Slovak State, moreover, was the only state unoccupied by the Nazis (until their invasion in 1944) that willingly pursued the deportations of its Jewish population to concentration camps, and paid 500 German Marks for every person being deported (Kamenec 2002). It was this perceived betrayal on the part of their Slovak neighbours that destroyed countless relationships for Slovak Jews. As many survivors recalled, these relations seldom improved after the end of the war. Beyond facing the painful loss of multiple family members – sometimes even whole families – survivors had to deal with more material betrayals. “It was days before I realised my sister survived as well. We met and then travelled home together. But there was no home anymore,” Martina recalled. “Someone else lived in our house, and we had to find another place to create a new life, although it did not feel possible at that time.”

Grandparents would sometimes share these stories with their grandchildren, partly to demonstrate that their neighbours were deeply unsympathetic. “One day after my return, I could see the neighbour’s wife walking down the street in my coat,” Martina told me a story she had shared also with her granddaughters, her voice thick with pain and condemnation. “When I asked whether I could at least have my coat back because I was cold, the woman replied, ‘Ah, you should not have returned,’ and walked away.” Most families had similar stories. Upon surviving and coming back to where their homes used to be, many felt unwelcome and actively excluded. Young Jews, listening to these stories from their own older kin or from other survivors, empathise with these emotions; and often, they develop sensitivity to parallels or signs of worsening conditions in current socio-political situations.

This sharing of experiences and memories often skipped one generation – that of survivors’ own children – until 1989, when *Shoah* survivors felt they could start talking more openly about the past. While there were also a few households where memories were shared even before the Velvet Revolution, in most families, the older
generations kept their war experiences to themselves. Even when they had grown up in such families, many of the young Jews I knew said that they felt their grandparents’ aversion, suspicion and carefulness towards non-Jews. “You just know these things, you notice how they react to politics or incidents with neighbours,” Alena explained to me. “The more I learned about what happened during the war, the more I understood their worries. We are not liked. It is not good to talk about your Jewishness.”

Often forgotten, however, are non-Jews who risked their own lives and the lives of their families to help Jewish people during the war by hiding them in their homes. “We should remember that Slovakia is one of the countries with the most ‘Righteous among the Nations’ awards per capita,” Milena reminded the group of Holocaust survivors. She, being a ‘hidden child’ herself, feels it is very important to remind people – both Jewish and non-Jewish – about the courageous individuals who put their lives in danger to save people who were often strangers. Milena mentioned this fact frequently, as if trying to make other people see its importance. Prompted by my questions about her life “in hiding,” as she called it, she said “Whosoever saves a single life, saves an entire universe” (quoting Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4: 5). Reflecting on the tendency to forget these gestures of protection, she said, “Sadly, there are not many of us now who can remind them, but the young people should know that there were Slovaks who helped Jews and hid them at times when doing so put their own lives in severe danger.”

During my fieldwork, the only time that someone from the young generation of Jews mentioned this was when I was travelling with Oliver through North-Central Slovakia (my home region). He told me that “most of the people who survived the war in hiding were actually hidden by non-Jews here.” I noted, “My great-grandparents were hiding a young Jewish man during the war too.” Oliver smiled, and said, “if only more people were like that.”

Most of the time, however, people within the Jewish community emphasised the dangers of trusting someone. Among the useful advice she received in her upbringing, Alena listed “You never know who is standing in front of you, you

---

36 The Jewish community has a club called ‘The Hidden Child’, which gathers people who survived the Second World War as children in hiding, by being helped by non-Jewish people (whether hidden in their houses, or looked after by bringing them food and other necessities).
should not rely on anyone,” as one of the most frequent. It was the deeply felt betrayal and constant sense of uncertainty and insecurity that fuelled mistrust transmitted across generations of Slovak Jews, which – as this thesis shows – permeated all layers of their social life.

Stories from the years of the Second World War, familial experiences and memories of the Shoah, and accounts from the years following survivors’ return from the concentration camps or places of hiding, as well as from Socialist times, all contributed to what I have called a strategy of ‘careful concealment’. New generations were raised with simple advice: “never tell anyone” and “do not talk about your Jewishness outside of the home.”

On the one hand, Jews face a persistent sense of insecurity; on the other, however, is a persistent sense of being misunderstood – which, according to many, exacerbates the risks of repeating the troubled past. This lack of understanding and recognition of what their families went through (see also Feuchtwang 2011), and what role the Slovak State played in their deportations, creates unbridgeable gaps between Jews and non-Jewish Slovaks. “People just do not know, unless their own families were affected by it,” Veronika explained. She added:

Antisemitism is still very present. During Socialism it might have been stronger. The state was against Jews and it was all still fresh from the war years. No one talked about the Holocaust. It was a public secret. Talking about it was a taboo, everyone was afraid. We did not even learn about it at school. When my daughters attended school and had their history lessons, they also did not learn anything about it. Tiso, what he did and his execution, these were all silenced during Socialism. It was only after 1989 when people dared to write about this past. I think that now most people do understand that it was something horrible that happened to us. Although there are also still people who do not want to believe it, or pretend that the Holocaust did not happen. Despite watching movies and seeing how it was.

Dealing with various ways of silencing the past, or facing people who deny the Holocaust, deeply affected social relations between Jews and non-Jews. Veronika’s daughter Klara also recalled how her history lessons made her feel “unappreciated, almost not important,” a disregarded part of something that used to be; “I felt very angry that there was so little written about the Holocaust,” she said. Similar reactions, to greater and lesser degrees, were shared by many young Jews. They, and often also their parents, felt that what people were taught about what happened
during the Second World War and in concentration camps was very limited. Not only had their families suffered unimaginable loss, but young Jews felt that others did not understand how that loss had come about, and how it had affected them – and continued to do so.

The experiences of the Shoah left a deep mark on families. They affected not only their histories, but were reflected and materialised in the physicality of kinship, leaving behind family trees with many prematurely cut branches. Painful memories remained for those who could remember, and empty spaces remained for those who could only imagine. Being born shortly after the war, Leopold realised this sense of incompleteness in his everyday life. “When you are growing up without grandparents, and often with no aunts or uncles, and you know it is not just you but also other Jewish children, it leaves a mark on you. You feel the void.” I heard the comment “we did not have grandparents” many times during my fieldwork. This sense of the family being incomplete, missing an important part, affected the way family as such was perceived, as well as how children were raised.

Family, thus – whether consciously, or through a non-verbal, often veiled and yet inescapable sense of incompleteness – became a space for the transmission of memories to which the state paid little attention, in no doubt also because of their political qualities (see also Carsten 2007b; Pine et al. 2004). Through the postmemory of the second generation (Hirsch 2008; Hoffman 2004; Kidron 2009) and also of young people belonging to what we may call the third generation, and in their sense of responsibility towards their ancestors, the ethics of remembrance comes to the fore, and remembering becomes a moral practice (see Lambek 1996; High 2015; Yerushalmi 1996[1982]).

For today’s young Slovak Jews – being already the second or third post-war generation – the aftermath of the Shoah is still very intensely felt. The realisation that one’s relatives were killed simply because they were Jewish influences how young Jews navigate their Jewishness in the non-Jewish majority public sphere. The Shoah, the unease of life during Socialism, and the issues of uncertainty, insecurity and mistrust surrounding their present lives were common themes of young Jews’ discussions. Whether these conversations took place in the late hours of SUJY events
or when a group of young Jews met up for a drink, the topic of war, unfairness, and the effects the Shoah had on their families resurfaced regularly.

“Of course I do not feel safe,” Alena said, reacting to Alex’s comment about her speaking in a lower voice whenever she spoke about Jewishness when a group of us had gone out for dinner. “The political situation now is worrisome, are you not scared?” she added. He nodded, admitting her point. “When you come from a family in which people were persecuted and murdered only because of their religion, you don’t feel like you want to scream your Jewishness to the air. It’s one thing how I feel myself, but saying it publicly is something else,” she continued. Everyone watched Alex’s reaction, knowing a large part of his family had survived the war. Alena put a stop to his questioning by saying, “Only a very few of my relatives survived the Shoah, on both sides; when that happens, it changes things.”

Interrupting the intense moment, Peter, who came from a mixed background, said, “I know how that feels. My grandmother was the only one out of 13 siblings to survive.”

Their perceptions of the past and their family’s experiences and memories of the Shoah, together with young Jews’ own sense of uncertainty and insecurity, maintained and reinforced a felt division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – and contributed to creating a sense of relatedness between those whose families shared these experiences, in contrast to those whose families did not (further discussed in Chapter Four). Simultaneously, these emotions influenced young Jews’ notions of insecurity and affected the ways they navigated their Jewishness in the non-Jewish world. Being brought up in families where their grandparents and parents kept their Jewishness hidden and upon discovering this family secret they were given simple yet crucial advice – to not tell anyone about their Jewishness – many young Jews, as I have observed, follow their older kin’s advice and try to keep their Jewishness private, selecting very carefully the people they felt they could trust enough to share this information.
Guarding the knowledge: Issues of trust and notions of insecurity

According to the results of the national census in 2011, only 631 people claimed they were of Jewish nationality in Slovakia. These numbers were based on an individual ascription and “affiliation to a particular nation, national minority or ethnic group” (Juhaščíková et al 2012: 6).\(^{37}\) In the 2001 census, 218 people identified themselves as Jewish by nationality; in 1991, only 134 people did so.\(^{38}\) By contrast, in response to a question about religious affiliation, where people could choose one of the 18 recognised churches, the option ‘other’ or ‘without religion’, 1999 people said they belonged to the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (CUJRC). 675 of those lived in the Bratislava region. In 1991, 912 people considered themselves Jewish by religion; and in 2001, it was 2310 people.\(^{39}\) In all cases, of course, the numbers reported are only a fragment of a much larger Jewish population – a fragment who felt comfortable sharing this information with the state and the public.

“People should not write they are of Jewish nationality in a census. It always makes me angry, how can they?” Viola was a Holocaust survivor who came to the Jewish pensioners’ club one day, and puzzled me with her passionate argument. “A Slovak Jew cannot be of Jewish nationality!” She explained that she believed a person can write that he or she affiliates with the Jewish religion if they feel like it, but added, “It is better to keep this kind of identification silent – because this information can surface and create trouble.” Viola described herself as a person who tried to be ‘one of many’ – to blend in. “We need to be one of them”, she argued, “so that we don’t have to live in fear.” During the club meeting, she shared her sense of

\(^{37}\) Out of 631, 228 people were from the Bratislava region.

\(^{38}\) People could choose from 15 options for recording their nationality: Slovak, Hungarian, Roma, Czech, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, German, Polish, Croatian, Serbian, Russian, Jewish, Moravian, Bulgarian, or ‘other’. 80.7% people declared their nationality to be Slovak; 8.5% Hungarian; 2% Roma; 0.6% Czech and Ruthenian. The rest comprised 0.1% or less, and 0.2% people chose the category of ‘other’.

\(^{39}\) Apart from other limitations in these censuses, the wording for the question about religious affiliation and the option provided on the form were problematic. Whilst the state recognises the CUJRC as a church, Jews themselves may not necessarily do so. The CUJRC is an umbrella organisation for 13 existing Jewish Religious Congregations (in Bratislava, Dunajská Streda, Galanta, Komárno, Nové Zámky, Nitra, Trenčín, Žilina, Banská Bystrica, Rimavská Sobota, Piešťany, Prešov, and Košice). The word ‘religious’ in the title is perceived by many as a relic from the past. Being a member of the JRC does not mean one identifies as Jewish by religion. Also, one may identify as Jewish by religion and yet not be a member of any JRC – nor of the CUJRC.
insecurity and hopes for the future, during which many Shoah survivors nodded sadly:

I hope the conditions of living without fear or insecurity will materialise at least for the future generations. However, I feel, this condition can happen only when these future generations feel distant to what happened in 1938-1945, and don’t experience antisemitism. It is important that they see themselves to be similar to or a part of majority society – only then will they feel safe.

The young Slovak Jews I came to know were still far from reaching this state. The familial memories and experiences of the Shoah are very present in their everyday lives, and they are reminded of their insecurity every time they hear an antisemitic comment – whether in their daily lives, in national political discourse, or in international events.

Upon discovering her Jewish descent, Dagmar was taught by her parents that “this is not something to shout about in public, and that it’s a matter only for the community and close family.” She received the same advice as her parents did while growing up. “You must not tell anyone about it,” they reminded Dagmar regularly. “I was always very careful not to reveal or say something in front of someone ‘external’ – very cautious that no words would give me away.” The worry of what might happen if someone found out about her Jewishness was constantly on Dagmar’s mind, and motivated her to carefully guard this information. She feared that knowledge of her Jewishness would have a negative effect on her friendships and other social relationships. “I kept it a secret for a long time,” she confessed, describing to me how she veiled her Jewishness even from her romantic partners, waiting for the right moment to share such a personal aspect of her life (discussed further in Chapter Four). “I don’t know whether anyone at my work knows about it, I don’t talk about my Jewishness at all.”

For many young Jews like Dagmar, keeping their Jewish descent secret, as if separated from their everyday lives, was the easiest way to navigate their Jewishness outside of the ‘safe spaces’ of home and the Jewish community. While most hid it from unfamiliar people and colleagues, many also felt it was sensitive information which could potentially harm their romantic relationships and friendships. But whereas Dagmar feared it could “put an end to a loving relationship”, highlighting
the fragility of trust, Peter decided to share this secret with his best friend. Having known his friend since childhood, he assumed he would be able to share the secret of his Jewishness with a person he could trust. “A few days after I told him, we had a band practice with other friends, and when I mentioned I couldn’t stay long because I had other plans, I just heard him say, ‘Are you going to that Jewish centre again? You spend an awful lot of time with those židákmi!’ [a pejorative term for Jews], in front of everyone.” This experience brought such disappointment to him that he had not spoken to his friend since then, and left the band. “You can’t tell people, they don’t understand.”

The issues of understanding and trust, and the lack thereof, reappeared continuously during my fieldwork, and formed the fundamental conditions or requirements for good social relations. Merely talking about the necessity of trust, however, implies a sense of uncertainty; as Sharika Thiranagama and Tobias Kelly (2010: 14) argue, the topic of trust “always assumes that betrayal is a possibility.” We trust because we cannot be certain. Young Jews’ practices of secrecy, and managing the visibility and sharing of the knowledge about their heritage, show how, in the midst of uncertainty, they build understanding and closeness; and how doing so allows them to navigate their Jewishness.

**Compartmentalising lives**

“I was brought up with huge reservations about Slovakia,” Teodor admitted, explaining that he did not feel very Slovak. “It’s because, I have to say, the majority of people in Slovakia don’t want us here. I think it’s a large majority. It’s very sad, but true.” Growing up, Teodor said, he perceived his Jewishness as a “handicap,” a feeling that still darkens his thoughts from time to time. “I felt I was different, and that it wasn’t good. The Slovaks never liked us. The word žid (Slovak for ‘Jew’) is a common swear word. It’s everywhere, from school to work,” Teodor argued. For him, as for many other young Jews, the way to navigate being Jewish in a non-Jewish society was to turn it into a secret and not to speak about it outside of the ‘safe spaces’ of home or Jewish community. Separating one’s Jewish life from lives
lived every day at school or work was a strategy chosen by many. However, it was a strategy, that did not help them to overcome the constant fear of someone potentially finding out about their Jewishness.

This need for a separation of lives was also something Karol described to me as a tactic he chose to navigate his Jewishness in non-Jewish environments. I attend some SUJY events, but I also have friends who don’t know that I am a Jew. Some of them are antisemitic, but when I hear them speak about Jews I don’t react,” he said. “They are good drinking buddies – good friends with whom I get along well on other platforms. If I feel like I want to chat to someone Jewish about Israel or something, I come to the SUJY.” The separations Karol kept between his groups of friends did not go unnoticed by many of his Jewish friends, however. Talking about the practice of compartmentalising their lives, Oliver described Karol as “an example going too far. He doesn’t want to tell anyone about his Jewish descent. He’s a covert Jew. He doesn’t want his friends to know – he doesn’t even allow me to tag him in photos from SUJY events on Facebook. He doesn’t want to be visible anywhere.”

Talking about Karol made Oliver angry, and he argued that people like Karol were ashamed of their Jewishness. “In my family we are not ashamed,” he said proudly; “we were raised not to talk about it, but when someone asks, I tell them I am a Jew.”

Alena and Eliska also decided to keep their Jewishness outside of their work environments. “You can’t just tell anyone – I don’t want them to look at me differently,” Eliska said when I asked her and Alena how their colleagues saw their Jewishness. “Of course not, you would be ‘that Jewess’ for the rest of your career,” Alena added. “There is a limit to which you can be open about it. You may trust some people, and share it with them, but you need to be careful choosing who to tell.” The thin line between being Jewish and being Slovak was thus often crossed, sometimes in order to blend in, other times because of genuine identification. The boundary was fluid, but often guarded, and could never be crossed completely.

One evening, after my Jewish friends threw me a surprise goodbye party at the end of my fieldwork, I was walking home with Alena and Peter. “Sometimes I try to imagine how it would be being born into the majority,” Alena said. This powerful question touched on many important issues occurring in a life of a young Slovak Jew.

---

40 See also Sophie Day’s work (1999, 2007) for similar practices among sex workers in London.
and all the uncertainties and sense of insecurity one needs to navigate. Coming from an endogamous Jewish background, Alena was wondering how it would feel to belong to and be accepted as a member of the Slovak people – when one does not need to fear intolerance or physical persecution, when one can freely say who she is and does not need to be afraid of negative reactions. She wondered how it feels not to be born into a family where a large part of one’s relatives had been murdered only because of their religious affiliation – and wanted to know how it feels not to be a part of a persecuted minority that still lives with a sense of insecurity. Neither Peter nor I replied. I for obvious reasons, and, because Peter had a non-Jewish mother, he felt he had been born into the Slovak majority as well. Alena, however, did not need an answer. We walked in silence, letting her statement just flow around us, knowing it could not go anywhere – no comment could make it disappear, or lessen its importance.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how young Slovak Jews navigate their Jewishness outside of the ‘safe spaces’ of home and community, in the unpredictable outside world of the ‘non-Jewish public’. Looking at experiences of betrayal from outwith the Jewish community, I have examined young Jews’ relations outside of the Jewish community, and raised questions surrounding trust and the value of knowing. Reflecting on several main political events occurring during my fieldwork, I have shown how young Jews perceive dangers of antisemitism more tangibly than their older kin, and how closely they observe the public discourse on minorities to assess its risks. Their sense of chronic insecurity, I have argued, had its source well beyond the troubling contemporary political situation, in the time-stopping rupture of the Shoah and the ways it continues to affect the everyday lives of survivors, their children, and their grandchildren. This critical event, the familial experiences and memories it generated, continues to permeate the fabric of the everyday, changing practices of relatedness, and bringing the past into the present. The persistent sense of insecurity was reinforced and intensified also through the familial transmission of
fear and young Jews’ inner struggle of a desire to make their Jewishness visible while at the same time managing the need to keep it secret.

In an effort to navigate this inner struggle, young Jews often choose strategies of ‘careful concealment’ similar to those chosen by their older kin – while also finding ways to compartmentalise their lives, reinforcing the distinction between the Jewish community and the potentially dangerous outside world. In this process, young Jews pay attention to the boundaries of the ‘safe space’ – whether in the materiality of a house, the movement of a body, or symbols worn – carefully guarding what becomes evident to a particular audience. Because “one can betray oneself” both visually and verbally, all aspects of presentation are monitored and knowledge is protected.

For young Slovak Jews, Jewishness is a very private part of their lives. The knowledge of their Jewishness is handled with care, guarded and shared carefully. Being Jewish is not only a religious, ethnic or cultural identification, but also a political identity. Through exploring the politics of memory and visibility of difference, I have shown how kinship, religion and politics are closely intertwined. Young Jews realise that shared knowledge about one’s Jewishness turns into powerful information with the potential to be used unsafely, to harm the individual or even their family. It is the worry associated with the power that this information might have in the hands of someone untrustworthy that motivates young Jews to keep the knowledge of their Jewishness secret. Apart from the potential to cause harm to individuals, people also fear what effects such knowledge might have on their relationships with non-Jewish friends or romantic partners. These worries shed light on the fragility of trust involved in social relations crossing ethnic and religious boundaries.

The decisions young Slovak Jews make on an everyday basis are influenced by their perceptions of the past, their familial experiences of the Shoah and years of persecution; their sense of uncertainty and insecurity in the present; and issues of trust that affect building relationships for the future. The next chapter turns to the question of how these emotions are negotiated when falling in love and choosing a life partner – which often requires crossing the boundaries of the Jewish community.
Chapter Four

Choosing a Life Partner

“My grandparents got married after seeing each other only once before their wedding. It was a different time.” Alena’s grandparents’ chuppah wedding took place in the late 1930s, before the advent of the Second World War had radically refigured everyday life in Slovakia, especially for Jews. “It was an arranged marriage,” she noted, explaining the story behind their match. Her grandfather had described his preferences to a shadchan (matchmaker), who then proposed a girl from a town one hundred kilometres away. In keeping with custom, the groom-to-be sent someone to scout out the situation, and received a report of her beauty and the respectability of her family. When making a match, what mattered most was that both partners should come from a similar socio-economic background. “The family background had to be the same. My granny was brought up properly and she was from a good family. Good references for the family’s standing was a guarantee that the relationship would work,” Alena explained. “And it did. They only met once, got married immediately after, and were happily together for around sixty years.”

By contrast, Alena’s parents, like many in the post-war generation, had what I call an ‘introduced marriage’. Alena referred to it as a “semi-arranged marriage,” because the family chose a suitable partner, introduced the couple, and provided space for them to date and see whether they would like each other, hoping the match would be productive. “They tried to match my dad with two other women before my mum, but he did not like them. Then they met a few times, started to date and fell in love. It seems like it was fate.” Perceiving the relationships of her grandparents and parents as happy and loving, Alena took them as proof that an arranged marriage – when a suitable partner is carefully chosen by older kin – makes a successful marriage. “I just wish it was possible to have such support and help, to be matched with someone,” Alena added wistfully, reflecting on the troubles young Jews now face when choosing their life partners.
The marriage-making practices of Alena’s family are representative of unions formed in particular socio-political contexts, and are common in the familial histories of many Slovak Jews. Before the Second World War, the majority of marriages were arranged through matchmaking on the basis of suitability, though some were initiated by feelings of love. But after the Shoah, choosing a partner was complicated by the limitations of the marriage market, and became a strategy to cope with the troubled past. Some wanted to forget their war experiences, and decided to marry non-Jews to distance themselves from their persecuted community and to secure a safer future for their children, who would not be ‘fully Jewish’. For others, however, marrying a Jewish person was a necessity – on the one hand because their upbringing excluded out-marriage as an option, and on the other hand because many survivors felt they needed to marry someone who would understand what they had been through. This marrying within communities of shared experience – a sort of experiential endogamy – was often secured through arranged marriages, and people sought spouses in towns that were even hundreds of kilometres away. But what mattered most immediately after the war was shared Jewishness, rather than shared socio-economic familial background – since most survivors were starting anew.

Many Slovak Jews of the post-war generation who married under Socialism, like Alena’s parents, experienced a form of ‘introduced marriage’. Their parents used social networks in Jewish communities around (Czecho-)Slovakia – and sometimes in Hungary – to find a suitable partner for their children, from a good family, hoping they would like each other and marry. As C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan (2008: 751) showed by studying changing marital practices among middle-class Brahmans in India, the distinction between arranged and love marriages is fluid, as parents arranging the match often consider the couple’s ‘personal happiness’. This fluidity is especially visible in the form of ‘introduced marriage’ I describe here, providing a compromise between arranged marriage and individual choice, as ideas

---

41 During the Second World War, worsening political conditions and the deportations scheduled for March 1942 – which explicitly targeted young, unmarried girls and women – accelerated the weddings of courting couples, and produced a ‘rescue-by-wedding’ practice in which men married their friends or strangers in order to delay their deportation. This trend was visible in the steep increase in marriage advertisements, appearing in Slovak or Yiddish, in the Jewish newspaper Vestník Ústredne Židov, which was published weekly in Bratislava for the whole Czecho-Slovak region. The numbers of such advertisements rose in late 1941 and peaked in early 1942, and had a rapidly declining tendency with deportations, in many issues disappearing completely. I was also told about these strategies by people who had such marriages.
of suitability and congeniality came to play an important role in spousal selection, and the final decision was delegated to the couple itself. While people who came from exogamous unions tended to marry non-Jews, the practice of ‘introduced marriages’ enabled parents who married endogamously to direct their children’s marital choices within the approved socio-ethnic group. This kind of help with matchmaking, however, as Alena noted, is often impractical now.

The present generation of youth faces new challenges in the Jewish marriage market, which was further limited by mass emigrations in 1968-1969 and after 1989, as well as by the subsequent possibilities of migration for work and study. I argue, however, that the inability of older generations to help their children or grandchildren find potential Jewish partners has also been exacerbated by practices of distancing and strategies of ‘careful concealment’ employed since Socialism (as described in Chapters One and Three), which weakened or ruptured previous social networks.

This chapter explores how young Jews negotiate their marital preferences and practices in light of these broken social networks, their ideals of romantic love, and their sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Perceiving the strong presence of the past, and realising their otherness through familial transmission of fear and mistrust, as well as contemporary political developments, young Slovak Jews strive to find partners who are the same as them – which is to say, Jewish – in a simultaneously broader and more specific sense. To satisfy this desire, young Jews pursue endogamy on new terms: they stretch group boundaries and loosen the definition of what makes someone Jewish, incorporating people with whom they share a sense of otherness based on the shared experience of being descendants of Shoah survivors. The traces of (vicarious) memory mark the meaningful terms of Jewishness, and make room for a new flexibility in determining marriageability. Through this inclusiveness, young Jews extend the limits of endogamy, and demonstrate the complexity and versatility of endogamous practice.

In the process of choosing their partners, however, I show that the young generation faces tensions between conflicting preferences for sameness and as-yet unknown difference, resulting in a desire for what I call a ‘foreign sameness’. Their ideas of passionate and romantic love are lived out in light of perceived limitations, ageing and societal pressures, as well as their fear and mistrust when making
compromises and marrying-out. Knowledge, as I show, plays a crucial role: close familiarity with a potential spouse may snuff the desired spark of romance, but a lack of knowledge impedes trust when relationships cross the boundary of the Jewish community. When otherness is not shared, I argue, even intimate relations are fragile and unstable – which underscores the political character of intermarriage.

While Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) highlighted the significance of exogamy, Pierre Bourdieu (1976) argued for the importance of endogamous marriage as a crucial strategy of social reproduction (see also Fader 2009; Heilman 2000, 2006). I draw on Bourdieu’s work here to show how marital strategies are navigated and rationalised by young Slovak Jews in view of their perceptions of sameness, shared values, and forms of capital, as well as their older kin’s marriage practices. I take these discussions further by arguing that what makes people the same – and the terms by which endogamy is defined – may transcend ethnic and religious ascriptions or matters of social class. In the case of Slovak Jews, shared vicarious memories of the Shoah have the power to make a person Jewish. This stretching of group boundaries enables young Jews to pursue a desire for sameness – in a context where tight closeness connotes incest (see Carsten 1997: 190-219) and conflicts with their ideas of romantic and passionate love – by accepting or denying certain forms of difference. Attraction, romance and love are desired preconditions for marriage, and the marital practices of young Jews highlight the processual character of choosing a spouse and an emphasis on individual choice. While trust is seen as a signal of love (see Donner 2012; Giddens 1992), I show how this link is complicated when betrayal, uncertainty and mistrust permeate social and intimate spheres. I argue that when marrying out and crossing the boundary of Jewishness, relationships are always fragile, and their ambiguity persists through time.

This chapter explores these issues in three sections. First, I discuss young Jews’ desire for sameness, considering their marital preferences and perceptions of what constitutes endogamy. In the second section, I focus on how they negotiate tensions between their marital preferences and their ideals of romantic love and

42 For other contexts see also Giddens 1992; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006; Padilla et al. 2007. For more specific contexts, see Yan 2003 for China; for Turkey see Hart 2007; Brink-Danan 2013; for Nepal see Ahearn 2001; and for India see Mody 2002, 2008; Donner 2002, 2016; Twamley 2013.

43 As discussed in Chapter Two and Three; for other contexts see also Thiranagama and Kelly 2010; Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016; Geshiere 2013, 2016.
attraction, in terms of a desired spark, the concept of ‘soulmate’, and notions of compatibility. Here I also explore the strategies young Slovak Jews employ to search for their potential partners. Finally, the last section examines what happens when a partner is found from outside the Jewish community, and people need to negotiate new tensions that appear in the process of marrying out.

Desiring sameness: Redefining endogamy

Among the young Jews that I knew, people of both genders considered the process of choosing their partners to be extremely important and articulated their preferences in terms of seeking sameness. Their understandings of what constitutes ‘sameness’ varied, however. Below, I discuss what Rebeka, Samuel and Alena were looking for in their spouses, by way of sketching the spectrum of concerns young Jews expressed.

Rebeka

When I met her, Rebeka was a 29-year-old woman of halakhic Jewish descent. Though she had turned to Judaism only a year and half previously, she was determined to live what she called a “proper Jewish life.” Considering her age, she felt that it was high time to create a family of her own. Even though up until that point she had been dating non-Jewish men, Rebeka was clear about what she wanted. “I want a good Jewish man,” she explained, noting that Jewish for her meant Jewish according to the Halakhah.

It was an early afternoon in August when I met Rebeka in our favourite coffeehouse, where we used to go to chat over one of their home-made pies. “Guess who wrote to me on Facebook,” she called over to me while she was still approaching the table, adding, without waiting for a reaction: “Oskar!” Oskar was a very sociable and sporty person who, though he did not partake in many community events, occasionally attended those organised by the SUJY. As Rebeka sat down and ordered, she started to ponder what she should do about his invitation for coffee. “He
is a show-off, not the type of man I usually go out with,” she said. While she did not find him physically attractive, and did not think he would share her interest in Judaism, she still decided to give him a chance. “What if?” she mumbled, looking at me and bluntly admitting: “at this point in life, I go out with everyone – no conditions or requirements – just that he should be Jewish.”

A few days later, we went for a walk and Rebeka complained: “I found out that Oskar is not Jewish!” Surprised by this information, I asked what she meant. She looked at me in a perplexed way, and explained, “Only his father is Jewish, or something like that.” Suddenly, the issue of who was ‘Jewish enough’ was present again – and playing a significant role in Rebeka’s choice of partner. For the life Rebeka wanted, having a non-halakhic partner would be unimaginable unless he would convert. After being told Oskar was not halakhically Jewish, she did not see the point of meeting him anymore. “It is different if he is Jewish, I can make him study the Torah and keep at least certain *mivvot* (commandments) later on with time, but if he is not a Jew then it is not worth it.” Like Rebeka, many Jewish women of a halakhic descent wanted to find a Jewish husband who would not only tolerate a Jewish upbringing for their children, but also play an active role in it.

**Samuel**

When Samuel turned thirty, he realised that his relationships with non-Jewish women were probably “not working out for a reason”. He wanted to get married. Although he was a halakhic Jew, at first he did not put much emphasis on his girlfriends’ Jewishness; but with time and experience, and several bad relationships, his opinion changed. “I realised that it is important to have a partner who has the same outlook on life as you, someone who was brought up similarly.” It was then that he made up his mind that the woman he marries will need to be of Jewish descent, with a similar upbringing.

“Non-Jews who do not have any negative experience of the past like the Holocaust – whether through their parents, grandparents or someone from the family – do not understand at all how we feel.” For Samuel, people whose families did not go through this experience cannot understand the legacies it has left. “This is a huge difference between us and them. The Holocaust does not concern them, they do not
look at Hitler the same way we do. They see all that as a part of history, but they
do’t feel it the way we do.” For Jews, Samuel argues, it is different, because the
catastrophe of the Shoah and deep sense of betrayal and unfairness it connotes are
transmitted across generations. “It is weird, I cannot explain why, but it was
somehow instilled in me as well. I was born in 1977 so it shouldn’t have affected me
at all. But it is within us.” According to Samuel, these emotions and sensibilities are
not embedded in non-Jewish upbringings; and so, “they wouldn’t be able to
understand even if we wanted to explain all this to them.” For him, having two
people from such separate worlds, with such different sets of values, makes the
intersection difficult and problematic.

Samuel saw the major difference between Jews and non-Jews most markedly
in the values transmitted to them from their parents and grandparents. According to
him, the non-Jewish majority does not have the same attitude towards life and
partnership or marriage as Jews have. “They do not value their partners and
marriages to such an extent as we do,” he explained, reflecting on his past
relationships with non-Jews. Implying that Jews care about and value their
relationships more because of the loss they had suffered, but also because of their
family-oriented lifestyles, he argued: “I knew I only wanted a Jewish partner and, in
the end, I was fortunate to find Dorota.”

For Samuel, like for many other young Slovak Jews, having a Jewish partner
was important because of their shared Jewishness – which he understood in terms of
instilled values, familial experiences that influenced upbrinnging, and outlook.
Although Dorota’s parents were a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman – and
though, for many members of the Jewish community, she was not ‘properly Jewish’
– Samuel saw their union as endogamous in these terms, and considered his wife a
Jew, the same as he was. It was her feeling Jewish, realising her otherness in relation
to non-Jews, and identifying with the legacy of the Shoah, that made Samuel see his
wife as Jewish.

For Dorota, though she had not been brought up as Jewish, and learned about
her Jewishness only in early adulthood, it was vital to have a Jewish partner with
whom she could share her interest in Jewish culture, but who also would understand
what she had been going through. “I needed a partner who would understand what it
means to find out about one’s Jewishness only later in life, and then coping with it, and learning more about Judaism and about being Jewish,” she said. “I wanted to share all this with my partner because it is an important part of me.” Both Dorota and Samuel consider their Jewish descent as well as shared values and understanding to be the crucial ingredients of their Jewishness, and of a working relationship.

**Alena**

Passing the Aupark shopping complex on our way to a badminton court centre, Alena abruptly changed the topic of our conversation and sighed, “How could he not like me?! I thought I had finally met a good man. And he was even Jewish!” It was only a few days after she had met Jonas, a young Jewish man who seemed to fit all her criteria. Though her hopes had been raised, almost as quickly she realised that her search was not over yet.

Alena, a 28-year-old halakhic Jew with a decisive, energetic personality, came from a Jewish family with a long endogamous past. She was brought up to be proud of her Jewishness, but to be very careful about with whom she shared information on her background. As she got older and watched her friends and colleagues getting married, she started to feel it was time to have a family of her own as well. “I believe and hope I will find him soon. It is roughly the right time. I am not saying that my biological clock is ticking, but I can imagine that I could marry someone within a year from now, and establish a family.”

Like many other women, Alena felt that, being almost thirty, having already completed her university education, and having found a good job, it was time to settle down. While her parents’ generation, who made their choices under the influence of Socialism, usually got married and formed families in their twenties, young Jewish women in contemporary Bratislava had trouble finding partners and often talked about familial pressure. Despite the changed socio-political atmosphere, and despite persistent parental advice that “it is better to be alone than in a bad marriage,” young women often felt that as they got older the chances of finding a good partner diminished.

When Alena met Jonas, she thought she had finally found the ‘right’ man. After several unsuccessful relationships with non-Jewish partners, she started
wondering whether there was something that makes Jews and non-Jews incompatible. “It is just difficult to fit with someone who is from a different world,” she often said. After her break-up with Jonas, it became a recurring topic of conversation. According to Alena, being Jewish meant being different. “He might be educated, have a good career, be well-travelled, but if he did not go through things we went through, I am not sure whether he will ever be able to understand,” she said. For Alena, as well as Samuel and many others, people who do not come from families affected by the Holocaust and other anti-Jewish persecutions cannot possibly understand how Jews feel.

At the same time, she claimed, finding a suitable partner was about the “whole package: on the one hand, what happened during the war, but also how your parents brought you up.” Through her dating experiences, she realised that what made her different from her non-Jewish boyfriends were also the values instilled in her via little things her parents and grandparents taught her. “I received my Jewishness in everyday upbringing. For instance, my father and also my granny used to tell me ‘do not spend everything you earn or you are given, always put some part away, you never know when you will need it.’”

During the year, we attended many community and SUJY events together, and every time, Alena would carefully look around hoping to see new male faces. Unlike Rebeka, for Alena, it was preferable but not necessary for a potential partner to be halakhic. “At the moment, I am still looking for a Jewish partner, although now I moved to a level when having only one Jewish grandparent is enough. I reduced a bit on my criteria and ideals.” What mattered to her was that her future partner would have some Jewish background, and would know what it meant to be a descendant of a Shoah survivor, to feel Jewish, and to be proud of his heritage.

Many young Slovak Jews considered the choosing of a life partner to be a crucial step in their lives, and attributed great significance to their central preference – finding someone who would be ‘the same’ as them. This desire manifested itself in two main forms.

For some, like Rebeka, it was very important to find a partner who would share their Jewish descent and fulfil the criteria of the Halakhah. More young Slovak
Jews, however, strove for a sameness based on a shared ‘otherness’ – in contrast to the majority Slovak society – rooted in being descendants of Holocaust survivors, and vicariously sharing that experience. Inheriting the terrible past that their grandparents were not supposed to survive (as discussed in Chapter Three; see also Hirsch 2008), made young Jews feel different from their contemporaries whose families do not share these memories. People like Samuel and Alena longed for the kind of understanding that they felt could only be achieved when a partner comes from a family that was also affected by the Shoah. Many young Jews saw being Jewish as equivalent to being the descendant of a Shoah survivor, brought up in a family affected by that catastrophe. As Dorota showed, this sameness is equally desired when one finds out about one’s Jewishness only later in life, but still identifies strongly with it.

Through creating relatedness based on sameness around these criteria, young Jews stretch the boundaries of Jewishness, and extend the limits of endogamy. These innovations, which involve a crossing and reconfiguring of the boundaries set by the Halakhah, are resisted by more Orthodox circles in the community, however. Anna and Daniel, the second Chassidic couple in Bratislava, expressed their resistance to such strategies by working to bring young halakhic Jews together so they could get to know each other more. Hoping their help would trigger more endogamous unions, they decided to host dinners for young unmarried halakhic Jews only, and asked Oliver, as the representative of the SUJY, to help them with invitations. As the request would mean creating a tangible – and, in Oliver’s opinion, very politically inappropriate and insensitive – distinction between halakhic and non-halakhic members of the SUJY, he declined. Despite his halakhic descent, Oliver did not attend any of these dinners himself. Telling me about the incident several weeks later, he was still furious. “I told them I will not do it – how could I? What should I say to those who are not invited? ‘Listen my granny was with your granny in the same lager [concentration camp], but although I can, you can’t go?!’” In returning to familial experiences of the Shoah, Oliver’s comment shed light on the tension between the inclusiveness of Nazi policy and the exclusive character of these dinners, and showed how a shared, troubled past matters for a sense of relatedness among young Jews. Jewishness, then, was revealed in the traces of memory.
Exploring young Jews’ preferences in choosing their life partners reflects not only different perceptions of what makes a person Jewish (discussed in Chapter Two), but also the ways in which different modes of sameness, or shared otherness, are being actively created. In their choices of partners, young Jews are negotiating and stretching the boundaries of community, and redefining the borders of endogamy; and, in this sense, they are reworking not only marital practices, but the social structure of the Jewish community.

**Imagining the ideal: Other preferences**

When choosing a life partner, young Jews also have other preferences to weigh besides Jewishness. One of the most significant criteria is of education and professional accomplishment. Considering the high level of education within the Jewish community as a whole, across generations, young Jews put a lot of emphasis on these achievements, and a university degree – no matter what the subject or discipline – is expected. It is important to find a partner who values education and knowledge as such, and who would be able to converse about various topics. Both Klara and Alena found it very difficult to date people who had not pursued university degrees. Being brought up in families of doctors, economists and lawyers, education was one of the most crucial values emphasised in their homes, and they felt this difference created yet another separation of worlds.

“Ah, David is an ideal man – educated, successful, fairly good-looking and even with a sense of humour!” Alena said one day, reflecting on her friend, “But I could never be the mother of his children.” Though many saw David as a good man, he had had a difficult time finding a wife. David wanted to lead an observant modern-orthodox life, and women did not feel that they could manage what would be expected of them. The issue of observance was not often discussed among the mostly non-practicing young Slovak Jews. Like Alena, many could not imagine dressing according to certain rules of modesty, eating only kosher food, or lighting candles every Shabbat. Having not grown up with these ‘limitations’, many young Jews looked for partners who practiced the same level of observance – or lack thereof.
While mostly silenced, a desire for their partner to come from the same or similar socio-economic background was also very much present. This aspect of ‘sameness’ was, however, more significant when young Jews were dating partners from outside the Jewish community. An emphasis on high educational and professional attainment appeared to create a sort of imperfectly homogenised environment within this group. Although in reality there was a form of inner-group stratification, the socio-economic differences were perceived as much stronger when the boundary between the Jewish community and the wider society was crossed. As Alena observed, reflecting on a previous relationship with a young Catholic man, “I think he was always under pressure to prove himself to be good enough for me.” Assessing it retrospectively, Alena concluded that it failed because they were “from different worlds. You can see and also feel the money in my family. And he, coming from a different background, felt awkward seeing all we had.”

For many, the way you were brought up and what values you considered important influenced your outlook on life. Seeing a high correlation between familial background, value systems and ideas about one’s future, young Jews attributed a lot of significance to choosing a partner who would share as much as possible with them. Alena once made a comment that nicely illustrated how young Jews felt about choosing their life partners: “I agree with the saying that vrana k vrane sadá (Slovak for ‘a crow sits by a crow’, similar to ‘birds of a feather flock together’). I am not interested in ideas that opposites attract. If there is nothing in common, no understanding or tolerance, then it will simply not work.”

Young Jews, then, prioritise a certain sameness – whether on the level of Jewishness (broadly understood), education, religious observance or socio-economic background – as fundamental for relationships to work. As such, they expend considerable effort finding someone who is similar to them in these terms. The pursuit of endogamy, I have argued, expresses itself on various levels; and while shared Jewishness is for many their foremost criterion, the next two sections will show that it is often also the one that ends up being compromised. While for the previous generations, shared Jewishness was crucial, nowadays many young Jews, facing the limitations of the Jewish marriage market, feel that other ‘ingredients’ are also important.
Romantic love and attraction

“That would not work – I know him too well.”
- Eliska on the issue of being ‘too close’

The ‘sibling issue’

While striving for sameness, young Jews need to consider not only where to find it, but also how it fits with their other ideals for a perfect mate. While sameness is sought by many, there is a fine line between ‘the desired’ and ‘the unimaginable’ which complicates possibilities and choices. This line separates potentially suitable partners from those with whom a relationship would never work, and marks some – using the words of my informants – as ‘too close’.

Dagmar, who came from an old Bratislava family with a religiously endogamous past, put a lot of emphasis on finding a Jewish partner. Though she had grown up in Bratislava, the city with the biggest Jewish population in Slovakia, and thought she had many Jewish friends, she complained that selection within the community was very limited. The problem was less about finding someone she liked than the lack of potential romantic partners as such. “Often you’ve known each other for such a long time that you’re almost siblings. So there is no spark, like you get with the unfamiliar. You just know each other too well.”

Barbora is one of many young Jews who came to Bratislava from other Slovak towns to pursue their university studies or to look for better employment opportunities. As the capital, Bratislava also attracts young Jews for its lively Jewish social life, rare in other Slovak towns. Barbora decided to move to Bratislava to study at the university, and immediately joined the SUJY. As she recalled, it was a conscious choice after evaluating the SUJY as the best option – if not the only one – for actually meeting some new Jewish people her age, and possibly a future partner. Like many before her, she realised later that it was not so simple.
After several years in the city, by the time they have finished their education or are otherwise ready to find a life partner, young Jews often find that there are not many people to choose from. “You have a group of, let’s say, 100 people,” Barbora explained. “Fifty of them are women, twenty-five simply drop off at first sight – because you have no common interests or nothing to talk about – and then there are very few left.”

At the same time, many young Jews in Bratislava established their closest friendships during their time with the SUJY. “I have several very good and genuine friendships with men from that time, but then there is no spark,” Barbora explained. “Because, simply, a best friend can never be your partner. You just see that person completely differently.” While the SUJY was a key source of Jewish sociality, then, the friendships formed there often precluded the possibility of romantic relationships.

A few years after moving to Bratislava from Eastern Slovakia, Eliska found herself in a similar situation. People often gossiped about her and Marian, a young Jewish man from a Bratislava Jewish family, saying they suited each other well and should be together. While they spent a lot of time together, enjoying each other’s company, they both seemed to be looking for something else. “I like him a lot. He is a person I feel very relaxed with, but there is no spark – no romantic or erotic love between us. There is no such extension.” Admitting Marian was a “real catch” and any woman would be lucky to be with him, she explained they just know each other – their dreams, flaws, but also dating histories – too well to date. “People often ask why we are not together, because they think we match each other. But that would never work. I cannot even imagine kissing him – that would be like incest.”

For most young Slovak Jews, ‘too much familiarity’ does not leave enough space for the development of romantic feelings. Whether this sort of closeness comes from actually growing up together within a small collective, so that peers are seen as siblings, or from strong friendships formed during one’s youth at Jewish organisations like SUJY, familiarity seems to serve as an impediment to romance. Young Jews complain they do not have many potential partners to choose from because they know most people in the same age group too well to date or to marry. A tension then arises between the marital preference of ‘sameness’ and the undesirability of ‘closeness’.
But what does ‘being too close’ mean? For many young Jews, being friends, spending time together and knowing a person’s negative characteristics and dating history snuffs the ‘spark’ which they associate with a potential romantic future.

Rabbi Myers once complained to me about this view of relationships:

To this day, I cannot understand that people are not marrying other Jews in instances when I feel it would have been possible. Even when there are real compatibilities, I often hear, ‘I cannot find a Jewish mate – but I could never marry him! He has been my best friend since we were children.’ I find it incomprehensible, who could be better to marry?

While he would sometimes tell young Jews that “you should be so lucky to marry your best friends,” young Jews seemed to crave something that could be described as a ‘foreign sameness’. As well as wanting someone who would share their Jewishness with them, who came from a family that had experienced the Holocaust, who had similar levels of education, observance, and socio-economic background, these young Jews wanted a sense of ‘difference’ or ‘foreignness’, someone ‘unknown’ with whom a ‘spark’ – created through friction – might emerge.

From their point of view, it was preferable to marry someone you meet as an adult rather than someone you have grown up with. Exploring the distinctions young Jews make between potential partners and ‘just friends’, however, it becomes clear that ‘spark-lessness’ tends to extend its limits with time and the depth of relationships established. Closeness based on knowing someone ‘too well’ becomes a barrier built by people themselves, limiting their marriage choices and making them more difficult.

**Desiring romantic love**

The desire for ‘foreign sameness’ is linked to young Jews’ ideas about romantic love. Being influenced by what they have seen at home, but also in wider popular culture – from local (Czecho-)Slovak to foreign literature, fairy-tales and romantic films – they form an image of a ‘right’ partner who brings together and materialises their ideals of romantic and passionate love, as well as their expectations of sameness.
Many young Jews share the belief that your ‘soulmate’ cannot simply be a person who has grown up next to you, but rather that you need to search for them. The imperative to look for ‘the right one’ is connected to an overarching feeling that there are unlimited possibilities ‘out there’. On one hand, this perspective assures young Jews that their choices are not limited to the people around them; but on the other hand, it creates new pressure to actively look for and find the ‘right’, or at least compatible, mate. But how do you know when you have met the ‘right one’?

“I think that it is just that you meet the person and you know that this is it. Maybe I am a bit naïve but I believe that the jigsaw puzzle will just fit together,” Alena asserted. She explained that if you meet “that right person and say to yourself ‘wow’, and you think that ‘wow’ will transform also to other levels and last over time, then that’s the way it should be. It has to fit.” Although Alena’s parents had a semi-arranged or ‘introduced’ marriage, she claimed they were in love, and she did not want to settle for anything less. “I just want to know that the man will fall when he sees me and I will be over the moon about him. That it will be that great love – from which then later a family and everything else might come.” Like Alena, many young Jews believed that, upon meeting the ‘right’ partner, they would “feel the connection,” which is associated with attraction and seen as an important condition, and then immediately know that that person was ‘the one’.

These articulations of the expectations of young Jews were framed in terms of romantic love and ideas about the ‘right one’ or a soulmate, which demonstrate a certain internalisation of ideas and concepts that are very much part of global popular culture. In talking about the extent to which these discussions become part of young Jews’ reality, it is important to highlight gender differences. While young men would rather address these issues in terms of searching for a compatible partner, young women articulated their ideals in terms of the ‘fated’ or ‘right one’ – an ideal mate waiting to be found or, preferably, trying to find them. Considering the age factor in this context is also vital, as among women, expectations shift with age, and later they tend to frame their preferences and choices rather in terms of compatibility and love.

Both young women and men who interacted with Rabbi Myers and attended his lectures would sometimes – usually privately – talk about bashert (Yiddish for ‘destiny’), drawing connections to popular notions of the soulmate. While the
bashert is used to talk about a destined mate in Orthodox circles, it often refers to a partner carefully chosen by parents and/or a shadchan (matchmaker) – through a shidduch (a system of matchmaking). The bashert thus is a “well-chosen suitable partner” that is believed to be the destined mate. As Rabbi Myers explains, “the bashert is ultimately the person whom you have married. You can only know that it is the bashert after the wedding takes place.” According to him, “if you are looking for a bashert, it means you are not looking for a perfect mate, you are looking for a person who is right for you.” Observing young Jews’ marriage choices, he asserted that people should be careful, because “if the expectations are unrealistic, it is quite possible that a person will pass over his bashert.” One Jewish joke the rabbi shared with me nicely illustrates the issue: “A man in his late twenties comes to see a rabbi and asks ‘Where is my bashert? I am still single.’ The rabbi answers, ‘You have met her, you did not like her.’”

While the rabbi sees young Slovak Jews as being hesitant and having high expectations and criteria, he argues that in Orthodox circles it is different. “We do not marry the ones we love, but we love the ones we marry.” Exploring young Jews’ preferences and decisions, however, it is clear that love plays a crucial role and appears to serve as a precondition for relationships’ development into marriage.

Of course, there are other incentives and considerations shaping even the early romantic choices of young Jews. One, most apparent in conversation and gossip, is the criterion based on attractiveness or physical appearance. Mike, a young man of a halakhic descent in his late thirties, joked that his grandfather very much wanted him to have a Jewish wife, and that part of him really wanted it too – though the other part wanted to have a beautiful wife. This joke hid a note of regret that he had not yet found a Jewish partner. While men were often circumspect with such comments, no doubt on account of my gender, women felt more comfortable saying that appearance plays an important role in their decision-making around relationships. Though several young Jewish women saw Oliver as an ideal man in many respects, for instance, they would always note that it was “just a pity that he is so short and already balding.” with a less-than-fashionable style of clothing. Comments that “the good ones are already taken” or that there are “no single
handsome Jews in town” were uttered regularly – and often when people were suggesting the need for a degree of compromise.

Reflections like these, plus the reluctance of young Jews to date people they found less than good-looking, bring to light the significance attributed to attraction and passion. Physical attraction specifically was an important component in contributing to the desired ‘spark’. “It is crucial that there should be a spark. Some kind of deeper connection is a must. Even if everything else was perfect, if there is no spark between us then it would not work at all. We could be just friends,” Alena explained. This “working chemistry”, for many young Jews, represented a necessary precondition that should appear immediately upon meeting someone, as well as a sign that it was the ‘right one’.

While fulfilling the criterion of sameness is important, then, people’s preferences are shaped by other ideas about compatibility. Many young Jews realise that there are other things, apart from shared Jewishness, that are necessary for a good relationship. They consider a partner compatible when s/he satisfies the criteria described above: a high level of education and professional accomplishment, a similar socio-economic background, and a commensurate level of observance. When these criteria are met, others are sought: being close in age, having shared values and ideas about the future, and holding similar outlooks on life factor heavily in choosing a spouse. But the need to find someone who complements or fits one’s own personality are present as well. “I want a gentleman with a sense of humour – someone who would balance my stubborn character,” Alena said, adding, “I know who I want – it is not that I am confused – it is just that I have not met him yet. I just need to wait and hope that one day I will find him.”

The matter of ‘how’: Searching for a Jewish partner

To meet a potential partner who might meet the criteria of ‘foreign sameness’, many young Slovak Jews need to deploy a range of strategies. Due to the current demographic situation, they know that when searching for Jewish partners in Slovakia, one must look within the socio-physical space of the Jewish community
“You can’t find such a person on the street, because you can’t really tell so easily who is Jewish or not, and you are not going to ask him to show you his grandparents’ birth certificates, are you? So the only way is to search within the community,” Alena said. This reality, combined with the small size of the Jewish population in Slovakia, means that young Jews are trying to find their partners in a very limited pool of possibilities. Many, like Alena, feel that “it is hard to look for someone potentially fated to you” in a natural, unforced way, when “it feels like you are fishing for a Jew in Christian waters.” Most know they need to make an extra effort in order to actually meet other young Jewish people.

The best chances of meeting a Jewish partner were in the context of the SUJY. Many young Jews recognised the importance of this group, and upon reaching the age of 15 – or when coming to Bratislava – they joined the Union. After gaining her university degree in a town in Eastern Slovakia, Alena too decided to move to Bratislava. “I knew it was the only way to meet someone. You need to go where Jewish life is actually happening.” For her, as for many others, attending SUJY events became an integral part of her endeavour to find a Jewish mate.

Regularly organised events – such as ‘shabbatons’ (Shabbat dinners hosted once every two months), film nights, dinner parties, or lectures related to Jewish festivals and holidays – constituted most young Jews’ Jewish social life in Bratislava (as discussed in Chapter Two). While the majority of the events took place at the community centre in Bratislava, there were also occasions when the SUJY ‘reached out’ to young Jews living in other towns. One such example was the autumn seminar.

This event, colloquially called ‘the seminar’, took place every year in a different Slovak town, and usually lasted for three to four days. It was a very special occasion which created a unique environment, and perpetuated a historical link between the SUJY and the Czech Union of Jewish Youth (CUJY). Since the early 1990s, when the Czechoslovak Union of Jewish Youth split into these two groups, they have organised two such events a year – one in spring, and one in autumn. Attending the seminar, for many the top event of the year, is a unique opportunity to meet young Jewish people from other Slovak and Czech towns. Spending these few

---

44 By the socio-physical space I mean the intersection between the social life of the Jewish community as a group of people and the physical space where they meet. Most Jewish social events – both communal and SUJY-run – take place in the Jewish community centre.
days in a hotel some place outside of Bratislava thus creates an invaluable chance for young Jews to meet people – satisfying their preference for ‘foreign sameness’ – they might never meet otherwise.

Even on the four-hour long train ride to Liptovský Mikuláš, where the autumn seminar took place during my fieldwork, I could feel the excitement. While they would often talk about this event in terms of a “kosher meat market”, the social importance of these few days was clear, and many – including Alena and Eliska – pinned their hopes of meeting partners on these seminars. At the same time, they worried that if they were unsuccessful, they would need to wait months or a whole year to have another chance.

Right after our arrival, having left our bags in a room we shared, Eliska and Alena decided we should go for a walk to see who had already come. The aim was simple. They could not wait to see whether any new men were attending this year. All together there were around fifty people – mostly from Slovakia. Considering the crucial social role this event played for many, the atmosphere was surprisingly unforced and dynamic. The whole seminar, apart from its educational elements (such as workshops and lectures about Jewish regional history and culture), was oriented towards participants getting to know each other. While during the day we spent time together partaking in various scheduled events, after dinner people formed smaller groups – some went dancing, others to a local pub and a few stayed on at the hotel playing pool or board games. Making a good impression was very important. For the Shabbat dinner, specifically, women made much more effort to dress up. Suddenly wearing jeans was not an option, and both Alena and Eliska put on make-up, cocktail dresses and high heels.

“So what do you say girls, have you seen anyone potentially interesting?” Alena tried to find out what our impressions from the first day were, while making clear that she liked Jonas, a young halakhic Jew from a small town in Western Slovakia. From that moment onwards, we contrived to help her spend some time alone with him, observed how she started to get invested, and listened to her wonder out loud about how to make a long-distance relationship work. While being happy for her, Eliska was visibly upset. “I cannot believe I hoped there would be some new
interesting men. Where are they? You see only a few of them and they are not really my type!”

For Eliska, this realisation was upsetting because she felt she was slowly reaching the age when finding someone becomes harder. Many people, however, shared her frustration. During the seminar, Lucas, who came with the Czech group from Prague, suggested that the next seminar should have also a sort of ‘speed-dating’ event which “would help people to quickly see whether there is anyone compatible.” He bluntly admitted that being already in his early thirties, he would like to settle down, and did not see another way to find a Jewish wife apart from at events organised by the CUJY and SUJY.

The age-related pressure was mainly visible among Jews in their early or mid-thirties, who knew that their most effective means to find a Jewish partner – attending SUJY events – would end when they turned thirty-five, at which point they could no longer be members. At the same time, there were also people in their early thirties, like Klara or David, who already felt “too old to attend the seminar”, thereby limiting their own chances of meeting a Jewish mate. Feeling “too old”, or simply being over thirty-five, Bratislava Jews lose one very important channel for socialising with other Jewish singles. For Stela, like many others, “being thirty-six, there is basically nothing else. All the other community events are organised for families with kids or the elderly. There is no other opportunity for single working adults to meet.” In this sense, age strongly influences people’s strategies in looking for partners, and limits the opportunities made available to them in the community.

There were very few community events during my fieldwork at which young Jews felt they could “maybe meet someone” – though many held out hope and would always look to see who might be present. Even at the Mitzvah Day’s cleaning of the Orthodox Jewish cemetery, which I attended with a few young Jews, Alena gazed around and sighed, admitting that she was hoping there might be some new male faces. The few community-wide events that were popular among single Jews in their thirties, and seen as providing opportunities to meet potential partners, were the High Holidays, the Purim ball, the Seder dinner, and occasional educational events.

For many, however, the reality was that outside of the SUJY, the chances of ‘naturally’ meeting a Jewish mate were very slim. Getting older and feeling these
pressures and limitations on the strategies they could use, young Jews needed to find alternative ways – from their perspective, often more radical – to search for potential partners.

Once they realise there is no one they find compatible around them, young Jews tend to ask for help. The first people they approach are usually relatives and friends. Using such social networks proved effective among their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, but currently there are only a few mothers, aunts or friends trying to introduce young Jews to potential partners. The reason for this is, I argue, that the mass emigrations of Jews after the Second World War, in 1968-1969 and after 1989, combined with the strategies of ‘careful concealment’ employed during Socialism weakened or ruptured extensive social networks, increasing the levels of unfamiliarity among survivors and their descendants, and limiting their ability to help broker marriages. Instead, young Jews often turn to their Jewish friends or acquaintances within the Jewish community for suggestions of potential matches. Eliska, among others, went on several dates set up in this manner. They usually turned out to be very awkward encounters. “We were just staring at each other, having nothing in common – of course apart from being Jewish – nothing to talk about. It was weird and almost painful,” she said. Despite their previous negative experiences, both Eliska and Alena complained that people do not suggest matches often enough, and argued they would go on such dates again. The possibility of meeting a “nice Jewish young man”, by their accounts, was something you cannot say ‘no’ to – certainly not in Slovakia. “You have to go and see. What if…?”

During my fieldwork, I was often asked whether I knew anyone suitable – by mothers, but mostly by young Jews themselves. Alena would regularly ask, in a joking way that highlighted her genuine interest, “Have you interviewed any interesting young men lately?” Occasionally I had to promise I would keep my eyes open and let them know. There were, however, also people like David or Rebeka who were looking for a certain level of observance and descent fulfilling the rules of Halakhah. Young Jews with such clear preferences preferred to ask for help from Rabbi Myers himself and, in David’s case, even a professional shadchan in Germany.
When these strategies were unsuccessful, or perceived to be too “forced and unnatural”, some young Jews also looked for potential Jewish partners outside of Slovakia. Many had long-distance relationships with people from Argentina, Bulgaria or Israel – and a few even decided to leave the country in hopes of meeting someone in places with larger Jewish populations (for the Turkish context see Brink-Danan 2013). Among popular destinations were, for example, Prague, London, and towns in the US or Israel. Most young Jews I knew were more open to relationships when they started with face-to-face interaction – as opposed to opportunities offered by online dating, which is still largely looked down upon as unnatural, uncertain and without clear potential. While many people had pursued transnational long-distance relationships, they often found moving abroad to search for a spouse problematic, and very few actually crossed this boundary.

Desire for a Jewish spouse and the reality of the dating scene were often at odds – and frequently marked a point of fracture. Despite their strong endogamous preferences, many young Jews did not employ strategies that would move beyond asking for help from their family, friends, anthropologist, or, less often, Rabbi Myers. People who take the Jewishness of their partners to be so crucial that they move abroad to better their chances are a minority. Seeing what strategies young Jews employed to find their partners, and where they drew the line and decided to look for partners outside of the community, therefore, sheds light onto how young Jews perceive their Jewishness, in the context of their familial background, marital preferences of ‘foreign sameness’ and romantic love, and ideas about the future.

**Marrying out: The issues of trust and notions of insecurity**

When she turned thirty-six, Stela reevaluated her dating strategies. She concluded that “while marrying Jewish is the dream”, one cannot control everything:

At some moment in your life the reality catches up. Sometimes that reality is called age. You realise you want to have a family and that you cannot or do not want to wait any longer. At other times, that reality is called love. Simply,
you have met the man of your dreams and well, what can you do, he will not convert for you or get circumcised. It just does not mean anything to him… But it is love.

At the point when searching for a Jewish life partner becomes too difficult, and previous relationships have not worked out, young Jews often started to talk about the need to “open up” to possibilities in wider Slovak society. For some, it is an age-related issue connected to familial and social pressures, or personal dreams and ideas about the future. Others simply fall in love, or come to the conclusion that waiting for a compatible Jewish partner is unrealistic. It is often when reaching their thirties that many young Jews begin to articulate their new dating strategies in terms of “making a compromise.” Dating outside of the Jewish community, however, requires a renegotiation of fear and perceived danger. In this context, many young Jews adopt novel strategies to deal with their worries of antisemitism.

Klara’s last serious relationship lasted four years. She was dating a Catholic man, Martin, and was happy. They were planning their future together. Despite coming from a religiously endogamous Jewish family, she never told her boyfriend about her Jewishness. “At first I did not want to say anything because I was scared, then it just never came up.” Facing similar situations in her own relationships, Dagmar decided she needed to be careful about whom to tell and when. “I kept it as a secret for a long time. I only told him when I was sure.” Dating her non-Jewish partner for months, she waited until the relationship was “more serious” and she felt she could trust him.

By contrast, and facing age-related pressure, Alena told her most recent non-Jewish partner straight away about her Jewishness, asserting that her children will be Jewish too and that she wants to bring them up as Jewish. “There is no point in delaying this anymore. I know I would not pursue the relationship if he is not fine with it.” For Stela, similarly, communicating her Jewishness and being open about her plans for the future was crucial. “He needs to be in agreement with you being Jewish and the way you want to live. You simply need an assurance that ‘Yes, I would not mind our children being brought up as Jewish and for you to take them to the community centre’.” For both Stela and Alena, it was very important to “be clear about all this before you invest in the relationship.” Many women in their thirties, especially, felt the need to be sure that when making a compromise of looking
outside the community for a partner, they would have their partners’ full support. Realising that “at a certain age there is no time to waste” on relationships that might later unravel because of conflicting ideals, they preferred to be open and discuss these issues before investing time and emotions. What, however, motivated both Klara and Dagmar, among many others, to keep their Jewishness secret?

As we have seen, the present young generation of Slovak Jews was brought up with feelings of ‘otherness’ – being constantly reminded by their older kin that they should not talk about their Jewishness in public because it is dangerous. This transmission of fear (discussed in Chapter Three) was accompanied, and in a way fortified, by the specific advice of their parents and grandparents to marry someone Jewish. This advice, articulated to me countless times, always conveyed the same message, using almost the same wording: “If you marry someone Jewish, at least you will not be called a dirty stinky Jew in the middle of an argument.” Many young Jews saw this statement as a very powerful and revealing insight.

This advice and ‘careful’ upbringing, however, perpetuate the idea that Jewish descent is something that could – and most probably would – be seen negatively by non-Jews. It demonstrates the continuing practice of othering at the heart of the Jewish family that reinforces uncertainty and insecurity. The difference between Klara and Dagmar’s strategies, as compared to Alena and Stela’s, apart from a slight age difference, was linked to the way they saw their Jewishness as something that might trigger negative emotions. Jewishness, for them, was still a private matter “better kept secret” – associated with being ‘different’ and with discrimination.

The fear of antisemitic reactions and misunderstanding from their non-Jewish partners, however, does not disappear with actual opening up to the possibility of out-marriage. When Alena’s previous long-term relationship with a Catholic man ended, she was stunned by the level of hatred he articulated towards her. “He seemed to be fine with my Jewishness when we were dating. But when we broke up, he rudely reproached me with accusations about the war, religion and property. How can someone who claims to love you say such things?” They had been together for three years and she could not believe what she heard. “It was very bad and that was only a quarrel. Imagine if there was a situation, playing it to an extreme, let’s say a
war, when I would need him to hide me and someone would threaten him, or offer him something for reporting me.” With a sign of resignation, she made a concluding comment that uncomfortably lingered in the air, “With non-Jews it is always mačka vo vreci (Slovak for ‘cat in a sack’, which translates as a ‘pig in a poke’) – you can never know what you’re getting. He can say he does not have a problem with my Jewishness, he can be tolerant, but when a crisis comes, I don’t know how he’ll react.”

Similar worries may resurface from time to time, even after many years of marriage. Lucka is in her mid-sixties, and despite being in a good marriage with a non-Jewish man she has loved for almost forty years, she admits that sometimes she wonders ‘what if’. “Do not fear, I would hide and protect you,” her husband said when she once confronted him with her concerns. Yet she still wonders whether he or her close non-Jewish friends would actually risk their lives trying to save hers, as some people did for her parents during the Second World War.

More than twenty years after the collapse of Socialism, the level of mistrust and uncertainty Jews feel towards the non-Jewish majority in Slovakia is still pronounced. As a result, relationships that cross the boundaries of Jewishness and non-Jewishness are always fragile and unstable. The ambiguity that is deeply embedded in their fabric does not evaporate even with time – not from generation to generation, nor in the time that has passed since the Shoah, nor even within a single relationship, as in Lucka’s example, with the time of living together. This fragility, and the persistence of Jews’ familial experiences and memories through their marital lives, makes the process of choosing a marital partner extremely important. Many young Jews desire endogamy because they imagine that Jewish partners would share the ‘sameness’ described above, but also because they feel they could count on each other for support and understanding. While these motivations are typical for a large number of Holocaust survivors, young Jews’ articulations tend to take the form of vicarious argumentation. They refer to past events, interpreted or imagined in the present, and potentially repeating into the future, and underline their uncertainty about how a non-Jewish partner might behave. Choosing a spouse implies an orientation to the future, but for young Jews it also involves a renegotiation of tensions between their desires and ideals, and fears and uncertainties from the past
that permeate the present. While people expect the danger of antisemitism from ‘outside’, what many fear most is the danger that may come from ‘inside’ when they open up and “let someone non-Jewish in.” [as Klara put it]. Among Slovak Jews, choosing a non-Jewish partner and marrying out is still considered an act requiring courage.

Anthony Giddens (1990, 1992) argues that trust is crucial for any functioning relationship; Kimberly Hart (2007) adds that it is not only the couple itself that needs to manifest trust, but that it must echo across larger kin networks. How, then, do young Jews negotiate the process of marrying non-Jews when they have been brought up to not trust them? And how do they reconcile their different preferences in the light of familial and communal pressure, and tensions arising between their own desires for love and freedom of choice, and the comfort of ‘sameness’ in contexts that associate mistrust and insecurity with people ‘out there’?

Making it work: Choosing a good non-Jewish partner

Barbora had always dreamed of meeting the right Jewish man and having a nice Jewish family. After joining SUJY, she tried to find this ‘ideal’ man for a long time. After two long-term relationships with Jewish men from the Czech Republic, she found herself at thirty-two years old and single again. At that point, she realised that she might need to look for someone outside of the Jewish community. “With time, I understood that Jewishness cannot be the only criterion for choosing a husband,” she said. Concluding that her previous relationships had fallen apart because there was something else missing, she started to search for someone more compatible. “I wanted a partner with whom I could feel relaxed, share my values and hobbies, and who would make me laugh. At the end of the day, that’s what matters. Although it took me some time to admit and accept it.” Feeling strongly Jewish herself, she always knew she wanted to have a Jewish family and bring her children up as Jewish. “I felt that I wanted to share these values and that background with my partner. I wanted someone who would not just tolerate and allow me to raise my children Jewish, but who would actively take part in the upbringing.” A few years
later, she found a non-Jewish man who fulfilled all her criteria – except the one of the Halakhah. Though her parents were not particularly happy about the match, at the time of my fieldwork, they were living very happily with two small children. “Now I know I can teach them all that is necessary, and he helps the way he can,” she noted.

With time, after trying to find a Jewish partner and experimenting with several unsuccessful ‘Jewish relationships’, many young Jews decide that they may want more than just a partner of Jewish descent. Prioritising romantic love, passion and mutual understanding, people often come to the conclusion that compatibility in those terms is more important.

“Life today is different than it used to be, I think; now we search for a ‘good’ partner,” explained Adela. For Adela, like many others, finding a compatible non-Jewish partner who would support bringing her children up as Jewish was “better than dating an unsuitable Jew.” While people would gossip about certain marriages being arranged and “badly matched” – the couple staying together only because they wanted a Jewish partner – young Jews always made clear that they had learned their lesson. In the midst of a break-up with her Jewish boyfriend at the time, Adela cited a Hebrew proverb – “Do not lie down with a good head on a sick bed” – and claimed it was worth waiting for the ‘right one’. At the same time, she acknowledged that the ‘one’ she was waiting for might not even exist. “Let me tell you a story,” she said, leaning in conspiratorially. “A mother is reading a good-night story to her daughter – it is a fairytale about a prince on a white horse, and the daughter asks her, ‘Mummy, why have you not waited for the prince on a white horse?’ And the mother replies, ‘I waited, but only the horse came’.” Adela knew there might not be a Prince Charming on the way, but had concluded it was better to be alone, or with a good non-Jewish partner, than with someone who does not share one’s values and dreams.

Many young Jews dread finding themselves in a bad marriage or a long-term relationship with someone incompatible. While a divorce, and especially divorce within an endogamous union, is still looked down upon in the Jewish community, Sara found herself in a situation where she knew there was no other way. Though many thought her fortunate for finding a good Jewish spouse, after a few years of marriage, she learned they could not have children, and her husband was opposed to
adoption. It was the dream of having children, of being a mother, that made her choose divorce. Thereafter, she married a non-Jewish man and adopted two children.

When making such choices, young Jews are searching for compatible partners who share their values and priorities for the future. Although they still look for their partners first within the Jewish community, they now open up more frequently towards the possibilities offered by wider society. This move towards dating and marrying out, however, is often spoken of in terms of making a “compromise.” Reconciling the tensions between their different preferences, young Jews realise a need for negotiating their own Jewishness in this changed context and their act of choosing the particular person in relation to who they are, making peace with what is expected from them.

The parents of young Jews, especially those who are themselves in endogamous marriages, are usually discontented with their descendants’ exogamous choices; but they try to give both advice and space for their children to choose for themselves. As Fedor, the father of two young Jewish women, explained, he “learned the hard way to see the good in interfaith marriages.” While his older daughter married out, and is bringing her children up as Jewish with the support of her husband, his younger daughter “just gave birth to a child whose Jewish father does not want to be involved at all. Sometimes a non-Jew can be a better man.” Barbora’s parents were also not particularly happy about their daughter’s choice of a non-Jewish partner, but they accepted it nonetheless. The out-marriage of young Jews was not taken lightly by Rabbi Myers’ wife Chanie either, who, as many recalled, would often comment, “You cannot all marry Tobias” by way of motivating young Jewish women “not to be so picky.” As Dagmar remembers, Chanie even cried when she heard Dagmar was marrying outside of the community.

On the other hand, there were also parents who understood the troubles young Jews trying to find a Jewish partner faced, who tried to explain to their children – often based on their own exogamous experiences – that there were more important things to look for than shared descent. Rebeka’s mother Tatiana was one such example. Having been divorced twice, she tried to make Rebeka see that she did not necessarily need to search for a Jewish man, since her children will be Jewish anyway. Rebeka, however, was furious about her mother’s position, and said,
“That’s just a shortcut – something that Jews who are weaker say to themselves in order to give in and find someone from mainstream society.” Despite the way she talked about her Jewishness, in her dating strategies it was clear that Rebeka did see her mother’s point; while trying hard to find someone Jewish, she considered other options as well, if only as a last resort.

The gender of the person choosing a mate also plays an important role. Young Jews are aware of the rules of the Halakhah, and many take them into consideration when making their choices. While gender matters within this decision-making process, it would be too simplistic to argue that one gender cares less about endogamy than the other. But women, for example, often find their role as ‘bearers’ of Jewishness soothing, because even if they do not succeed in finding a Jewish partner, Barbora noted, they know that “if raising their children Jewish, [they] can still produce and safeguard the existence of the next generation.” With this in mind, many women feel less pressure – personal and familial – and concentrate on choosing well and ‘compromising’ if necessary. As Barbora admitted, “the fact that Jewishness is inherited from the mother definitely eased the dilemma I had, but I don’t know what I would’ve done if it was the other way around.”

By comparison, I could see the extra pressure this put on men like Oliver and David, who actively sought Jewish partners because they knew that if they wanted to have Jewish children, recognised by the Jewish community in Bratislava, intermarriage was not an option. Unexpectedly, knowing their children will be Jewish motivates women who want to have a Jewish family to search harder for a Jewish partner. Men do usually try longer – but many ultimately end their search, prioritising other preferences, and later often compromising on the Jewish upbringing of their children and their post-marital activity in the community.

Given that a non-Jewish partner will influence both future levels of engagement with the Jewish community and Jewish family life, many young Jews limit the terms on which they are willing to make this “compromise.” The marital preferences and choices of young Jews considering non-Jewish partners boil down to four main traits that make a good spouse: atheism, willingness to raise children as Jewish, tolerance, and a familial background with no anti-Jewish history.

---

45 This advantage, however, in turn becomes a responsibility, often judged by other people as to whether it is being done properly (see Chapter Six).
One of the most important attributes young Jews look for in their non-Jewish partners is atheism. This criterion is crucial especially for women who would like to bring their children up to be Jewish, and who feel that a partner with no religious affiliation would be most likely to create space to do so. “Considering compromises, in my case, I can go to the limit of dating an atheist – I could not go any further. The point when any religious [non-Jewish] consciousness starts would be unacceptable,” noted Alena. For her, as for many others, having a Christian or Muslim partner would create potential for misunderstanding, tension, and rupture in the relationship. Finding a person who was not raised to adhere to any religion is taken as a good starting point for establishing a balanced relationship based on tolerance. “By atheist I mean someone who of course does not go to church, but also in terms of faith, he simply wouldn’t believe in God,” Alena added. “Marrying an atheist means that if I brought something religious to that relationship, he wouldn’t have a problem with that and would leave it up to me.” In this context, Alena believed that “we would raise our children properly – to be responsible, hardworking, and, on top of that, I can add my ‘Jewish feeling’. She also hoped that an atheist spouse, “with time […] would pick up something. Because an atheist should be more open to possibilities – as he is not fixed to any religion.” Many argued further that the family background was also important, and preferred partners who had been brought up in an atheist environment.

While men also favoured atheism in non-Jewish partners, women put extra effort into finding atheist spouses. For Barbora, it was crucial that a future partner would be fine with raising their children to be Jewish. She worked to ensure that her children would not be introduced to any Christian influence within the sphere of ‘home’ in an expanded sense, including the parental but also grandparental households. “When I imagine that I will take my children to his parents and they will start to talk about Jesus, bring crosses to show and discuss Christmas, that is not what I want. Everything would be washed out.”

Atheism is, in part, an indicator of an even more important condition that non-Jewish partners must fulfil – the person in question needs to be tolerant, and to show openness to cultural, ethnic and religious differences. “My parents and grandparents always told me I need to be careful about that and find someone
tolerant,” Oliver said. Given the insecurity, xenophobia, and danger associated with opening up to wider Slovak society, young Jews found the process of actually meeting a person whom they could trust both challenging and necessary. “It is not until after a while that you know what she really thinks,” Oliver noted. For both men and women, a sense of trust and security is one of the most important goals for which young Jews strive in their marital choices.

A potential non-Jewish partner’s familial background is important in these terms too – and transcends the limits of religious, ethnic and cultural affiliation, extending to the sphere of socio-political orientation. “Coming from a good family” was an important means of building up trust. Many young Jews, like Dagmar, defined a good non-Jewish family as a family with “no associations to Hlinka, Tiso or the pro-Slovak State political ideology.” Young Jews explore the environment their potential partner grew up in, looking for reassurances that the family is tolerant and not antisemitic. They often try to figure out the political orientation of their non-Jewish partner’s family by asking about their partner’s parents and grandparents. Dagmar described her own process of seeking this reassurance:

One can see it immediately from his opinions and attitudes, or overall how that family was oriented ideologically. For instance, even if they were Catholics – but if his grandparents and parents were pro-Czechoslovakia and they were supporters of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, then it shows that they did not belong to the nationalists.

Building the trust necessary for a relationship involves seeing that non-Jewish partners and their older kin alike are not nationalistic or xenophobic, and denounce the actions of both the Slovak State during the Second World War and Socialist Czechoslovakia.

Marriage in general, and out-marriage specifically, has a highly political character. Marrying out affects the way the family is perceived within the Jewish community, the status of the individual making the choice, and also the status of their children, raising questions across the board about their allegiance (as discussed in Chapter Six). Many young Jews who come from endogamous families, like Alena and Barbora, felt a strong responsibility to find a Jewish partner to respect and honour their heritage, and later felt guilty about being the first ones in their families to date non-Jews and to marry out. Choosing a marital partner is a political decision
particularly in view of past familial experiences, when issues of uncertainty, mistrust and insecurity are so pronounced. For many, exogamy implies selecting a partner from a group of people who potentially stood by and watched their Jewish neighbours being stripped of their rights and deported to concentration and extermination camps. Young Jews thus feel they need to find a good partner within a pool of people who cannot be completely trusted.

Conclusion

In light of my previous examination of group boundary-making and othering, as well as betrayal, mistrust and insecurity, this chapter has explored the process of choosing a marital partner among young Slovak Jews. As I have shown, young Jews desire a certain form of endogamy, and seek Jewish partners who could share their ‘otherness’ with them – in terms of Jewishness, but also in respect of the troubled past that permeates their present lives. Young Slovak Jews stretch group boundaries – redefining what makes a person Jewish – to incorporate people with the shared experience of being the descendant of a Shoah survivor, and with shared vicarious memories of the difficult past. Criteria beyond ethnic or religious affiliation with Jewishness are also applied – including, for example, education, level of observance, social class, and memory. In this sense, and showing that Jewishness is revealed in the traces of memory, young Jews also extend the limits of endogamy.

Endogamy essentially implies marriage based on a certain sameness, typically within boundaries marked by caste, class, social status, ethnicity or religion. As I have shown, however, ‘sameness’ varies depending on how people define group boundaries, what they consider to be the constituting features of sameness, and who recognises it. We might understand the choice of marital partners in terms of what capital (Bourdieu 1976, 1986) – whether material, social, cultural or symbolic – plays a role, and to determine what is being reproduced in the process of marriage-making. While Bourdieu emphasised the significance of endogamous marital strategies for social and cultural reproduction, among Slovak Jews, where the
boundaries of endogamy are not static or fixed, a messier reality emerges. As Fuller and Narasimhan (2008: 743) observed among Tamil Brahmins in India, subcastes often merge into one group, ensuring ‘subcaste endogamy’, and reproducing both the (sub)caste and class. In Slovakia, as I have shown, among young Jews the sameness sought in endogamous practice is layered – with memory having a constitutive power in determining Jewishness. This chapter has illuminated what happens when such complex notions of sameness are based on shared otherness and the postmemory of the Shoah. Although these forms of sameness may not be recognised by all community members, young Jews see their marriages as endogamous. Their unions reproduce not only Jewishness, as they understand it, but also shared difference and the postmemory of the troubled past, as well as fear and a sense of insecurity.

In the course of choosing a life partner, young Jews are faced with tensions arising between their preferences for sameness and the risk of too much closeness, which conflicts with ideals of romantic love and the need for a ‘spark’ and attraction. As familiarity and closeness are seen as impediments to romance, young Jews strive for what I have called ‘foreign sameness’, which – uniting the qualities of being the same and yet unknown and different – contributes the desired spark. Although with age the dating preferences and practices of young Jews change, and the terminology accompanying them tends to shift to terms of compatibility, both men and women consider a spark necessary for courtship, and think of love as a precondition for marriage. While expecting love to come first sits in tension with the ultra-Orthodox perspective – and often older kin’s experience – that love is made by marriage, for most young Jews the importance of love in a relationship exceeds that of shared Jewishness.

Getting older and facing the limitations of the Jewish marriage market, many Jews decide to look for love and compatible mates outside the Jewish community. This opening-up, however, invites mistrust, uncertainty, and the dangers of an unpredictable outside into the ‘safe space’ of the home. While knowing someone too well creates a ‘spark-less’ relationship, not knowing potential non-Jewish partners well enough equally engenders a sense of danger from ‘inside’. This shows, as I have argued, that trust emerges from knowledge, and that an ideal relationship involves a
balance between too much and too little knowledge – between being not ‘too close’ before courtship but knowing enough to feel secure and trusting.

The perceived presence of the past, as well as ‘careful’ upbringing, create a need for young Jews to negotiate their choices in view of historical betrayals, transmitted fear and a sense of uncertainty. Endogamy, as I have argued, represents safety and understanding, while exogamy highlights the tension between defending against dangers coming from outside, and the risk of inviting danger inside. Relationships that cross the boundary of Jewishness, in their ambiguity, shed light on the fragility of trust. In Slovak, ‘to trust’ translates as dôverovať or veriť – terms which show the performative aspect of trusting, while underlining the uncertainty involved, and connoting faith and hope. Within this specific socio-political and historical context, trusting ‘non-Jewish others’ in the private sphere has been made difficult by familial experiences and memories, and the level of mistrust within the ‘Jewish public’. As trust is not a given even in intimate relations, when ‘otherness’ – and the vulnerability associated with it – is not shared, the possibility of betrayal is always present. To navigate such uncertainty, distrust and fear of othering in the heart of the family, young Jews look for signs of tolerance at individual and also familial levels, trying to gain reassuring knowledge in their search for a ‘good non-Jewish partner’.

Marriage, in its essence, has a political character because it implies the crossing of boundaries in uniting two kinship groups – often with divergent memories and experiences. In this sense, kinship, memory, and politics are inevitably entangled. The importance of marriage and marital choices reaches beyond both individuals and families, and represents a medium by which to secure the continuity of Jewishness on a community level – or undermine it – especially in the politicised context of a small community highly affected by the Shoah, where the marital choices of young Jews can be a powerful means to demonstrate their allegiance and sense of belonging. The following chapter explores how marital choices are negotiated through wedding rites.
Figure 9: the chuppah of the JRC in Bratislava
Chapter Five

What Makes a Wedding Jewish?

A wedding is a major *rite de passage* (van Gennep 1960) for Slovak Jews. Given its orientation towards the future, and its simultaneous reminders of the significance of the past in the present, this particular ritual provides important insights into how young Jews perceive and manage their Jewishness in contemporary Slovakia. Choosing among Orthodox, Liberal, or civil wedding ceremonies, and making decisions about their own event, young Jews demonstrate the ways they identify with their Jewishness, how they are seen by various sub-groups of the Jewish community, and how they imagine their futures as spouses and parents. But these choices also generate questions about what defines and distinguishes a Jewish wedding. Is the civil wedding of two people of Jewish descent Jewish? Or is a Jewish wedding something more?

This chapter considers what makes a wedding Jewish. While one might assume that the meaning of this ritual is linked closely to ancient Jewish wedding traditions that connect Jewish people with their ancestors, this chapter focuses on the various ways in which some of these traditions may have been transformed through time, innovated or even ‘invented’ (see Hobsbawm and Ranger (2013[1983]); Ochs 2007, 2010; Leeds-Hurwitz 2002). I show how these alterations, and their limits, are fluid, unstable, and yet carefully guarded. I explore how these transformations of tradition take place during the wedding preparation process among the Jewish community in Slovakia, and what influences them, while reflecting on preoccupations with authenticity and the unexpected spaces it opens for the possibility of innovation.

Having studied wedding practices among three generations of Slovak Jews, who were married between 1940 and 2014, I argue that people’s perceptions of what makes a wedding Jewish have changed over time, under the influence of changing political regimes and shifting local ritual knowledge affected by post-*Shoah* demography, mass emigrations in 1945-1948, 1968-1969 and after 1989, and the arrival of the Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbi Myers in 1993. Having what young Jews call
a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding now represents a practice which I describe as a return to an ‘unknown’ tradition – since the form of the ritual and the requirements surrounding it had not been experienced by their parents or even grandparents. In the constant conversation between local Ashkenazi and Chabad perspectives, and in the effects of wider popular culture and changes to Jewish ritual performance abroad, wedding ‘traditions’ have been reinvented and innovated. What makes a wedding Jewish, I suggest, changes with time, and depends on who is making the judgement.

In search of authenticity, I show, young Jews strive to fulfil ritual requirements and negotiate their limitations – sometimes in attempts to make smaller alterations, more often by donning and then removing displays of ‘tradition’ and signs of Jewishness. The ways in which such performances are undertaken, and in which Jewish weddings are organised, however, reveal a persisting sense of insecurity and fear of antisemitism. Employing what I have identified as a strategy of ‘careful concealment’, young Jews found ways to make their chuppah ceremonies ‘public’ by creating a separate, ‘private public’ space – which I describe as a ‘Jewish public’ – and keeping it hidden from non-Jewish others. The stretching and shrinking of ‘private’ and ‘public’ highlighted in this chapter, I argue, is not a religious but a fundamentally political process. On the one hand, young Jews want to have their weddings witnessed within the ‘Jewish public’, to gain social legitimisation and recognition; on the other hand, they carefully guard the boundaries of this ‘safe space’, and strive to keep their chuppah rites, as well as their Jewishness, secret outside of it.

Ritual, in general, through making relationships visible in an extraordinary moment often marked as ‘time out of time’ (Bronner 2011: 8; see also Bell 1992, 1997; Rappaport 1992), is believed to produce and reinforce both social hierarchy and solidarity (see Bloch 1992; Durkheim 1912; Turner 1969, 1974; Geertz 1973, 1957; Myerhoff 1980; Sosis and Alcorta 2003). The more demanding the ritual, the stronger the bonds and distinctions (see Sosis 2003, 2005; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014; Whitehouse 1996).46 I argue that the ritual of a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding

among Slovak Jews, due to its rareness and uniqueness, creates a special moment for commemorating the past and re-imagining what used to be, while celebrating the present success of ‘making’ a new endogamous Jewish family, as well as hopes for the future continuity of the Jewish community. This rite of passage, as I show, connects the couple with their ancestors and the imagined past, and also with other members of the Jewish community, contributing to a sense of solidarity. Undergoing a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding not only visibly marks one’s Jewishness, but is a powerful means to demonstrate and reproduce devotion and belonging in the politicised context of post-Socialist Slovakia – where young Jews often need to negotiate conflicting social statuses (as discussed in Chapter Two) and recognition is sought.

This chapter highlights several important tensions surrounding the ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding for young Jews and their kin – when deciding whether to have one, preparing for one, or finding out that one or both spouse(s) is not ‘Jewish enough’ to undergo the ritual. (In)eligibility, in particular, emphasises and creates new distinctions among young Jews – not only between those who are halakhically Jewish and those who are not, but also between those who marry endogamously and those who marry out. In the latter case, especially when Jewish women marry non-Jews, ways of demonstrating continuing allegiance to the Jewish community and heritage must be sought, often taking the form of small signs of Jewishness incorporated into civil marital rites. This chapter concentrates not only on the marriages of young Jews who fulfil all the Orthodox requirements, but looks to situations where people face various challenges, want to make small gestures, or need to ‘camouflage’ the fact they are having a Jewish wedding at all. I use the wedding preparation process and its celebration as a lens to explore how young Slovak Jews negotiate their Jewishness, fears of antisemitism and feelings of insecurity, as well as their desire (and felt need) to demonstrate their devotion and sense of belonging.

This chapter is divided into three sections, in which I explore the wedding ritual as such; the created space of the ‘Jewish public’, in which weddings take place; and the role a chuppah wedding has for young Jews in post-Socialist Slovakia, as well as how other alternatives are negotiated.
The wedding ritual: Temporality and authenticity

When I first met Martina, she was already in her early nineties and living in the Ohel David – a Jewish pensioner’s home established in 1998 to care for Holocaust survivors. A cheerful woman of short build and elegant style, with life experiences that many would not want to imagine, she always greeted me with a hearty smile across her lined, worried face. Sitting in her small room, being poured a cup of peppermint tea, I admired the many beautiful things she had collected. “You cannot fit your whole life here,” Martina said once, urging me to taste some of the apple tray cake her daughter had baked for her. Her words stayed with me.

All of the things Martina had brought with her were carefully selected from among many others because of their sentimental value – and because she felt life without them would be incomplete. Her room was furnished with a bed and shelves lining two walls, and was decorated with a green china set with little flowers, books and some family photographs. In the middle of the room were two beautiful wooden chairs with green embroidered velvet that were part of a set she had bought with her late husband for their flat in a town in Western Slovakia. These objects, having been chosen to accompany Martina through the last phase of her life, were cautiously selected, packed, brought to this small room, unpacked and carefully put in their new places – just as she herself had been. They all found a new home there.

My attention was caught by one bigger, framed photograph displayed on a shelf by the television set. It was her wedding portrait. This picture, she explained, represented the most beautiful and happiest memory she had. Standing next to her husband, in his loving embrace, she wore a veil with little flowers around the head-piece and a white gown, and held a large bouquet with white flowers. The picture was black-and-white, yet it somehow lit up the whole room. When I asked about her wedding day and wedding preparations, she just smiled at me and said there was not much planning involved. This smile was different from her others – gloomier, more melancholy. She had been in love with the man who became her husband, but they
felt they were still too young to marry. She herself was only seventeen. But when the
rumours of planned deportations reached them, they made a choice. “We knew there
was a transport planned, and that young unmarried women and girls would go first.
So we decided to get married quickly, hoping it would delay any possible actions
taken against us.” Martina got married in 1940. As required at that time, they had a
civil ceremony first, followed by a private Jewish wedding. She recalled that a
*chuppah* was brought over and built in the back yard behind her parents’ house. “It
was a quick process,” she said; she did not even recall circling around her husband.
The wedding was simple, and officiated by a Neolog rabbi. 47 “We just came
underneath the *chuppah* and the rabbi made a *kiddush* and we were married.” 48

Ideas about what makes a wedding Jewish – or what basic criteria are ‘enough’ for a
wedding ceremony to be considered Jewish – have changed over generations, under
the influence of changing political regimes. While marriage rituals during the Second
World War were often simplified and turned into more private events, weddings
organised during Socialism were sharply affected by its secularism. Public
knowledge that a couple had been married religiously risked social hardship for them
and their children, including in terms of employment and educational opportunities.
For the Jewish minority, who were regarded as an ‘enemy of the state’ under
Socialism, the situation was even worse. The everyday activities of Jewish
community members were observed by the secret police, known as the State Security
(*ŠtB*). Documents from this era prove that the *ŠtB* was working to eliminate any
“racial marriages” among ‘Zionists’, as they called Jews (see Bumová 2006a: 80-81).
During Socialism, Jewish weddings under a *chuppah* – if they happened at all – had
a strictly private character. The smaller and more intimate they were, the better.
While such weddings often took place under the ‘cloak of the home’, in bedrooms or
living rooms to stay out of the sight of neighbours, many Jewish couples also had
their *chuppah* ceremonies in other towns – somewhere no one would recognise them.

---

47 Neolog Judaism, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, is a more open, reform movement,
established during the Congress of Hungarian Jews in Budapest in 1868 (for more see Introduction, or
48 The *kiddush* is a blessing over wine, and, at the occasion of a *chuppah* wedding, also over the
marriage itself.
“Although a wedding is a very special event, one of the most important days, when family and friends meet together to bless the new couple,” Kara explained, “it was different when we got married.” She married her husband in 1975, when the political regime was opposed to public religious displays. Being a teacher, she knew she could not be seen having a religious, and specifically Jewish, wedding – she would lose her job.\footnote{She feared losing her teaching position because under the Socialist government, a person responsible for educating the next generation could not be opposed to the values of Communism – and being religious or having a religious wedding was considered a form of opposition to Communist ideology. In the end, Kara lost her job anyway, as the ŠtB found out about her Jewish wedding.} However, because “the family tradition required a ritual Jewish wedding”, she and her husband-to-be decided to take the risk and marry elsewhere, “where no one knew us.” Kara described her wedding as ‘untraditional’, explaining, “there were no exciting preparations for the ceremony, no cooking of a celebratory menu… the only food we had were two loaves of barches that my mother-in-law baked for us.”\footnote{Barches (also called challah) is a twisted bread that is baked for special occasions, including Shabbat dinner.} They decided to get married in a little town in Southern Czechoslovakia. Each of them arrived there individually, and then after the ceremony also quietly left separately, in their own cars. Even the few invited guests, consisting of their closest relatives only, had to “sneak furtively into the building.” Kara did not wear a white gown, nor a veil, and did not even have a bouquet – but they did stand under a chuppah. For Kara, the day was still very vivid in her memories, not only because it was her wedding day, but also because it reminded her “how difficult it was during that time to preserve one’s identity and belonging to the faith of one’s parents with dignity.”

Many Jewish couples encountered similar obstacles to their chuppah wedding ceremonies during the Socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. Some travelled to other cities in the country, others decided to go to smaller towns just across the Hungarian border. Often bride and groom travelled separately, and sometimes even a few days apart, so that their journey would not raise suspicion.

These stories show how Jewish weddings, under two different political regimes, had a predominantly private character emphasising the intimate performance of key aspects of Jewish wedding traditions. For weddings organised between 1945 and
1993, the focus was on elements of tradition and custom that were remembered and considered important by people partaking in the ritual. The form and process of a chuppah ceremony varied between regions, communities and even families, as the detailed knowledge embedded in experience often died with older relatives during the Shoah. Having a Jewish wedding now, for young Jews, involves what I describe as a return to an ‘unknown’ tradition. Currently, in order for a wedding to be considered Jewish, it needs to have a form not experienced by the parents and even grandparents of young Jews.

It was a warm, sunny day in summer 2012, and the garden behind the only standing synagogue in Bratislava was full of well-dressed people. All were awaiting a rare event. A dark red baldachin (wedding canopy) with embroidered golden stars had been built, and stood prepared on four poles decorated with white and gold lace and white flowers with green leaves. While the rabbi was going through the ketubah (marriage contract) with the groom and witnesses, Kornelia was getting ready upstairs in a special room of the women’s section. Upon signing the ketubah, the groom’s party headed upstairs for the bedeken – the veiling of the bride. “There were many steps we had to go through,” Kornelia recalls. From proving their halakhic descent by supplying original copies of their grandparents’ birth certificates, through attending preparation classes, learning about the laws of family purity (Tohorat Ha’mishpahah), visiting the mikvah (ritual bath), and fasting on the wedding day, to choosing the right wedding ring, proper attire, and making paper kippot (skullcaps) for guests, the process was complex. Kornelia even decided not to see her husband-to-be during the seven days preceding their wedding as Rabbi Myers encouraged it. “This made the day all more special,” she explained.

With her groom Adrian already waiting underneath the chuppah, Kornelia made her way down, accompanied by her mother and the mother of the groom, who both held lit candles. “We circled around [Adrian] seven times, which my mother did not like because she went around my dad only three times on her wedding. The rabbi made a kiddush over a silver cup with red wine, then I was given the ring and the ketubah was read.” After the rabbi recited the Seven Blessings (Sheva Brachot), the couple drank from the refilled kiddush cup again, and Adrian smashed the glass with
his right foot. The whole ritual was observed by many people from the community, and was concluded with a joyful Mazal Tov! Then the couple spent some time secluded in the yichud (seclusion) room to symbolically consummate the marriage. “It was strange but at least we had some refreshments there, so we could eat after a whole day of fasting.” While the yichud custom made the couple feel awkward, they went along with the rabbi’s requirements, and often jokingly turned the experience into an entertaining story.

The examples of weddings I have chosen – held in 1940, 1975 and 2012 respectively – demonstrate how rituals of marriage among Slovak Jews changed under the influence of different political regimes and also the local knowledge affected by the community’s demography after the Holocaust, the waves of mass emigration in 1945-1948 and 1968-1969, and the arrival of Rabbi Myers in 1993. While those who took part in them considered all of these weddings to be Jewish – mainly because they involved two Jewish individuals standing under a chuppah baldachin and someone knowledgeable reciting the Seven Blessings – there are also many differences between these particular rites. Dissimilar perceptions of tradition and ideas about what makes a wedding Jewish were most evident when people reflected on their own experiences and compared them with ‘post-1993’ wedding practice.

These divergences arose mainly around the practice of circling the groom. While it was considered unnecessary in Martina’s case under the wartime Slovak State, it reappeared during Socialism – when women would circle their husbands three times. As Eleonora explains, “I do not remember circling my husband seven times. We had a real Orthodox wedding, but we did not do that. I walked around him only three times – and not with candles for sure. On my daughter’s wedding, however, we complied with the rabbi’s wishes.” Circling the groom is believed to create an invisible wall around him, by which the bride protects him from “untoward desires” (Kaplan 1983: 158) and binds him with obligations – such as providing clothing, food, and conjugal relations (Kaplan 1983: 159). While the local Ashkenazi

51 For the first wedding that Rabbi Myers officiated in Slovakia, a chuppah baldachin had to be borrowed from the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava, as the JRC did not own any wedding baldachins anymore. People tended to use tallit or other pieces of cloth instead. This need for borrowing also showed that with the arrival of the rabbi, there was a clear return to what I call ‘unknown’ tradition. Later, this chuppah was returned to the Jewish community in Bratislava.
custom is to circle around the groom three times, the origin of circling seven times may be found in Kabbalah (Kaplan 1983: 160), where each circle is associated with one day of creation. The custom of making seven circles is therefore typical of Hasidic movements like the Chabad-Lubavitch. Although most people were unaware what the circling was meant to do, or what the number of circles signified, changes in this practice were debated as indicative of an uncomfortable level of innovation.

People often argued that while they came from Orthodox or Neolog families practicing shared local Jewish traditions – though observing them to different degrees, with slight alterations between more distant regions – Chabad practice introduced something new and foreign. Such differences appeared in other spheres of Jewish community life as well, but it was especially in the context of wedding rituals that the constant negotiation between local Ashkenazi and Chabad customs was highlighted and discussed.

‘Donned’ limitations

Young Jews who themselves were making choices about whether to have a Jewish wedding or not, often reflected on their decisions in the light of their parents’ and grandparents’ experiences. Facing the limited possibilities and identity politics of the post-1989 community, many of them wanted to have what they called a proper, ‘traditional’ wedding. The desire to return to an ‘unknown’ tradition, taking Rabbi Myers as a guarantor of authenticity, motivated some young Jews to begin their married life with what could be described as a ‘costly’ ritual (Sosis 2005). It was costly not just in terms of its financial demands, which were comparable to a non-Jewish ceremony, but in terms of the specific demands it put on individuals themselves, and the power that participating in this rite had to prove one’s devotion (see also Sosis 2003; Howe 2000). People undergoing this ritual with Rabbi Myers had to fulfil certain requirements that the couple and some of their relatives and guests saw as exaggerated, and even limiting.

One of the constraints that stood out most during the wedding preparation process was the issue of the place where it would be held. According to several
Shoah survivors, weddings in Slovakia were customarily organised outside – so that they would happen ‘under the stars’. A chuppah represents a house open on four sides – like Abraham’s tent – symbolising the openness of the couple’s new home to guests and hospitality. As such, it should be erected outside, thereby associating the ritual with God’s blessing to Abraham that his children be as numerous as the stars. This practice is an Ashkenazi tradition, widely employed in the region; and Rabbi Myers, having a Chabad-Lubavitch background, put a lot of emphasis on the custom. Under Socialism, however, weddings were moved inside for privacy and security, and many young Jews now find the requirement unusual, unnecessary and limiting – especially if the wedding is held during the colder months. Since 1993, most Jewish weddings happened in the garden behind the only standing synagogue in Bratislava. However, as with every rule, there was also one exception. Tobias and Emma, for sentimental reasons, asked Rabbi Myers whether it would be possible to have their chuppah ceremony inside an unused old synagogue in a small town near Bratislava. After a careful inspection of the place, and having found two holes in the roof through which the sky was partially visible, the rabbi was willing to strike a compromise. The chuppah was built under these holes.

While this example shows that the rules can be “stretched” if the basic requirements of certain customs are kept – as determined by Rabbi Myers – there are also aspects that are non-negotiable. Another such aspect of ‘traditional’ weddings that young Jews found problematic was the rabbi’s insistence on determining who the witnesses would be. According to Jewish law, for the wedding to be valid, one must have two male, halakhically Jewish and observant witnesses that are not related to the marrying couple, or to each other (see Kaplan 1983: 173-175). The popular custom in Slovakia, however, is that a bride and groom each chooses their own witness from among their close friends, or relatives, honouring this person by giving them an important role to play during their wedding. The inability to choose – without having to pay attention to religion, gender or observance – frequently bothered young Jews, as well as their older kin. The main issue with the requirement, however, was linked to politicised discourse on who is ‘Jewish enough’ (as discussed in Chapter Two), and on the creation of distinctions between people in ways that were not strictly observed, if at all, among those in the older generations.
Another tension between majority custom and Orthodox practice arose with the ceremony itself. The crucial part of kiddushin, the sanctification of marriage, is the actual act of the groom giving an object of value – a ring – to the bride, reciting “Behold, you are betrothed unto me with this ring, according to the law of Moses and Israel.” It is at this point, when the ring is placed on the bride’s forefinger, that the marriage becomes valid. Many couples wanted to incorporate a second wedding ring for the groom into the ceremony, as is the custom in wider Slovak society. But this addition can happen only after the whole ceremony is over – not under the chuppah – when the second ring is presented to the groom as a gift from the bride. “I have no problem with gift-giving, but it cannot be a part of the kiddushin,” the rabbi explained. As having both spouses wearing a wedding ring is considered an important, publicly visible sign of marriage, thus making the changed status of the couple apparent, couples generally defer to the rabbi’s wishes and the bride presents the groom with his ring only when the ceremony is over. However, both rings usually have the same design, so they are visibly of the same set, and they are worn by both the husband and wife every day after the wedding.

Efforts to comply with Jewish traditions and to meet Orthodox requirements, at least for the sake of having a chuppah wedding, are also evident in the attention given to selecting the right clothes. Under a chuppah, a bride should be dressed in accordance with the traditional rules of modesty (tzniut). As the rabbi’s wife explained, both the skirt and sleeves should be as long as possible, so as to cover the knees, elbows, shoulders, back and chest. While previously modesty was also important in local Ashkenazi weddings, Chabad introduced a new level of strictness. Some brides, like Emma, had their gowns made and tailored for this special occasion, and found a fashionable way of combining the latest trends with traditional requirements. Most brides rented their gowns from bridal shops, and then had to find a way to make them comply with what was considered appropriate. Both Lea and Kornelia, for instance, chose a white, sleeveless, corset dress with a long A-line skirt. Before walking under the chuppah, however, and for the duration of the ceremony, they both decided to wear another upper layer over their dresses that covered their shoulders and arms. Lea wore a white jacket that also kept her warm in the colder weather. As Kornelia was getting married in summer, she chose to wear a beautiful
lace bolero with long sleeves. The choices made in the regard of the ‘covering’ layer – and the contrast between what is worn during the ceremony and afterwards, when no upper ‘modest layer’ was needed – show how important it was for the brides to satisfy the demands and rules of the ceremony. Indeed, the practice of ‘layering’ may be seen as a matter of putting on and taking off ‘tradition’, negotiating what is required and what is desired.

The matter of clothing, though it did not affect grooms to the same extent as brides, was still revealing in the way men approached tradition. Most men wore a black dress suit or a tuxedo, and donned a *kittel* or a *tallit* over their shoulders. A *tallit* is a prayer shawl, usually white and blue; a *kittel* is a knee-long white robe, with no pockets, that buttons up to the neck and is worn by Orthodox men on their weddings, every Yom Kippur thereafter, and at their funeral. Wearing white is symbolic for the couple, as a wedding is considered a spiritual renewal – a sort of ‘personal Yom Kippur’, when all sins are forgiven. Lea, having been told that a *kittel* is the “traditional wedding gift,” went to buy one for her husband-to-be in Vienna. After all the trouble she went through to find one, Teodor said he felt uncomfortable wearing it, and wore only a *tallit* over his black jacket instead. When I asked Teodor about this on another occasion, he explained that a *kittel* symbolises true Orthodoxy for him, and that though he considered himself traditional, he did not feel ‘so religious.’ A *kittel* represented an extra layer of religiosity to which he was not accustomed, as it was not what he was brought up to and what he associated with his Jewishness. While certain traditional requirements were considered important, then, some were seen as exceeding the personal limits of couples’ comfort zones. It was often at points where the rules could be stretched or bent, without necessarily compromising the authenticity of the event, that the approach couples adopted tended to be simpler.

Wearing a *kittel* under the *chuppah* was not a tradition introduced with the Chabad-Lubavitch outreach, but is also a local Ashkenazi custom. Older generations recalled that, even during Socialism, grooms wore a *kittel* under a coat or jacket. A few weddings after Rabbi Myers’ arrival also incorporated this garment. The change surrounding this practice, and the resulting preference for wearing a *tallit*, happened only with the wedding of Eleonora’s daughter Silvia in late 2000s. Having attended
the Orthodox wedding of her nephew in Israel a few years previous, Eleonora, who came from a practicing Jewish family herself, was surprised when she saw that he donned only a *tallit*. “I thought wearing a *kittel* was necessary for a wedding,” she reflected. The fact that the wedding was considered Orthodox, and took place in Israel, was enough for her to conclude that a *kittel* is not required. When preparing her daughter's wedding, she asked the rabbi to make a compromise. Because the change she suggested was acceptable in Israel, she did not see why it should be problematic in Slovakia, and she stood by it. “The rabbi wanted my daughter to circle her husband-to-be seven times. We made a compromise in that matter and I wanted to have some say as well. This change was done for me.” Later she also admitted to me that she felt better that her son-in-law had not worn the “old-fashioned, backward *kittel*”, because there were also some non-Jewish guests at the wedding ceremony. She wanted to make clear that being Jewish was not all ‘backward’, and thought that seeing a groom dressed in a “weird-looking long shirt” would not help this image.

Since Rabbi Myers agreed to that alteration, all grooms who got married afterwards preferred to don a *tallit* instead. This ‘stretching’ of the custom shows how a couple’s negotiation of particular small adjustments gets easier when similar changes have already taken place, and have been allowed within the scope of tradition and authenticity. The question then arises: what, if anything, makes a custom authentic or ‘properly Jewish’? To answer this question for themselves, Slovak Jews often looked to sources of authority like Rabbi Myers, or to an imagined ‘proper Jewish life’ among ‘traditional communities’ in Israel and the USA.

**No (major) alterations desired**

Orthodox feminist women in Israel, as Irit Koren (2011, 2010) writes, strive for change and demand a certain level of equality within the wedding ritual. Trying to change some aspects of wedding customs, they negotiate their attitudes and proposed adaptations with their parents, husbands and rabbis. At the same time, some young Jews in Slovakia are trying to return to these same traditions, previously unknown to
them – and they often want to go through a more ‘costly’, hierarchical ritual, which they negotiate with their kin. Why do Slovak Jewish couples accept the various forms of inequality and constraints that others are trying to change?

Jewish couples in Slovakia who decided to have a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding with Rabbi Myers did not intend to introduce any major innovations or alterations. While the ‘proper’ form of the ritual itself was unknown to many as it had not been experienced by their parents or even grandparents, Rabbi Myers’ ceremonies were still seen to have a ‘traditional’ character. The customs that he practised were seen as customs that ‘used to be’ carried out, thus creating a link to the past and their ancestors. Young Slovak Jews saw the ritual of the *chuppah* wedding as a powerful means of demonstrating devotion to Jewishness and the heritage of their ancestors, asserting a sense of belonging and a desire to belong, and marking a distinction between themselves and Jews who married out of the community. Crucially, the choice to demonstrate these things took place in the very politicised context of being Jewish in post-Socialist Slovakia, adding an extra layer of meaning to the decision to have a ‘traditional’ wedding.

As we have seen, however, what makes a wedding ‘traditionally’ Jewish is at times blurry – particularly when looking at the different experiences of people getting married during the Second World War and Socialism. Despite an obvious tension between the local Ashkenazi traditions and the Chabad approach brought by the rabbi, there seems to be an imagined category of ‘ideally traditional’ that manifests itself as a return to former practices.

For young Slovak Jews, having the wedding done ‘properly’ – meaning in accordance with Jewish law and tradition – was crucial. Although some small alterations might be proposed or undertaken – Lea, for example, wore a necklace with a jewel (opposing the local Ashkenazi tradition) – these are not seen to compromise the historical integrity and validity of the Jewish wedding tradition as such. Neither the couple proposing the change nor the rabbi’s accepting it were taken to be problematic. The fact that Rabbi Myers allowed certain small adjustments signified that they were still in accordance with Orthodox requirements. Thus, the couple and people present at the wedding could rest assured that the ritual had a ‘traditionally’ accepted, legitimate form. As Tobias described his wedding in a rather
revealing statement: “It was not an ultra-Orthodox or an Orthodox wedding, but it was a wedding that according to religious rules was absolutely correct. We had all the traditions. The ceremony was officiated by Rabbi Myers, so it was done properly.”

For people who decided to have a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding, it was very important that it went “according to the rules”. Much like Tobias, many young Jews claimed their weddings were not religious, but were ‘traditional’. This demonstrates another distinction often made by the young generation – in the light of their experiences of life among the Christian majority in Slovakia, as well as their family’s stories of dissociation from Judaism as a religion after the Shoah – between the ‘traditions’ of their ancestors and religion as such. Many argued that their choice to have a chuppah wedding was not motivated by religious devotion, but rather by their identification with their Jewishness, feelings of ‘otherness’, and the legacy of their ancestors. They chose to have their weddings officiated by Rabbi Myers not because of his religious status, but because he was seen to be an important figure able to set the limits on what is ‘authentic’ and what is not. Through the continuous negotiations arising from the differences between local Ashkenazi and Chabad traditions, it became apparent that the rabbi, by sometimes stretching the rules and allowing some small alterations, or not, in a way also shapes these ‘authentic’ traditions himself. It is, however, the fact that a wedding at which he officiates is accepted and recognised as legitimate, in Orthodox circles around the world, that has value for young Slovak Jews. The ritual’s precious value is closely connected to the legitimisation it grants the couple’s Jewishness, and also the Jewishness of their children, in the context of post-Socialist Slovakia.

The ‘Jewish public’

“We travelled to our wedding separately, just to avoid any suspicion.”

– Kara on the practices in uncertain times

227
In search of a safer space

As I have illustrated in the examples above, the state and particular political regimes have, to an extent, influenced wedding and marital practices and strategies among the Jewish minority. While various laws promulgated by the Slovak State during the Second World War affected who a person of Jewish descent could marry, wedding practices themselves were shaped by the Socialist regime, its secularising policies, and anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish stance. Jews getting married between 1948 and 1989 had to employ various strategies to negotiate their Jewishness and their desire to have a Jewish wedding in contexts of marked insecurity.

Given the risks of persecution and discrimination, and the shift towards secularisation, some decided only to have a civil wedding. Many Jews, however, still saw having a Jewish wedding as important, both for themselves and their relatives. When couples wanted a chuppah ceremony, they employed two main strategies. Some, such as Kara and her husband, travelled to another town – whether in Slovakia or across the Hungarian border – in search of a safer place where people would not recognise them. At times people chose a town with a rabbi who could perform the ceremony, but often they just sought a place that would be far enough away to be seen as safe.

The other strategy was to move their weddings – and build a chuppah – inside. Although the local Ashkenazi custom dictated that a chuppah should be built ‘under the stars’, as I have noted, wedding rituals during Socialism were largely moved into such ‘safer spaces’. Many, such as Adam, found this refuge within their own homes, where practices of their ancestors could be hidden under the ‘cloak of the house’, behind brick walls and drawn curtains, under a protective roof. These relocations of the wedding ritual turned houses into more ‘public’ spaces (see Pine 1996).

52 These laws were formulated as negative marriage rules describing whom certain people were forbidden to marry (or have sexual relations with), based on different degrees of Jewishness. Head III §9 of Act 189/1941, also known as the ‘Jewish Codex’, clearly stated that a person regarded as Jewish or of ‘mixed-blood’ – whether male or female – was not allowed to marry a non-Jew, and vice versa. The penalty was imprisonment for three years. This law also prohibited “conscious extramarital sexual intercourse” between a Jew or a person of ‘mixed-blood’ and non-Jew, and set the penalty at five years of imprisonment.
Adam, who was in his early seventies at the time of my fieldwork, was a retired teacher who welcomed any opportunity to learn more about nature or life in general. His thirst for knowledge, willingness to help where needed, and his optimistic nature made him very likeable and popular in the Jewish community. Married in 1972, Adam and his wife had two wedding ceremonies: a civil wedding at a local town hall, as required by law, and then also a small private chuppah ceremony, later on the same day. Adam himself came from a small town in Eastern Slovakia; but as local custom among the Jewish community, as well as among the Slovak majority, dictates that a wedding should be in the place of a bride, both weddings were organised in Bratislava. As Adam recalled, his aunt and mother-in-law made a chuppah baldachin in the bedroom of his parents-in-law, where the young couple lived after their wedding. It was a very private ceremony, with only few family members present. “The chuppah had four poles and we were standing leaning against the marriage bed of my parents-in-law,” he said. Recalling his uncle reciting the Seven Blessings, Adam explained, “It was all as it was supposed to be. We even broke the glass, and my wife even circled around me several times with her father by her side.” While he admitted that he did not understand “what the prayer said,” what mattered was that it was recited at all. Retrospectively, comparing it with the way that Rabbi Myers celebrates weddings, Adam said, “It was not as long as when the rabbi does it, but it was done.” His wife did not get a ketubah, “her family laughed and said that it was not needed. They dropped everything unnecessary, only the key things were done.”

Between 1945 and 1993, as Adam’s account and others show, the practice of Jewish wedding traditions was influenced by the Holocaust, Socialist politics, and also the mass wave of emigrations in 1945-1948 and 1968-1969. As empirical knowledge and direct experience of wedding practice often died or left with people, Jews who stayed in Czechoslovakia practiced rituals as best they could – based on what was remembered and, in the Socialist context, considered important and necessary. The strongest emphasis was put on keeping such weddings, as their Jewishness, private.

---

53 Act No. 265/1949 of Family Law clearly stated that in order to be legal, or even recognised, a marriage must be officiated in front of the body of a local national bureau. A religious wedding, if desired, was allowed only after a proper state-recognised civil ceremony.
A move towards the ‘public’: Seeking recognition

It was not until several years after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 that the situation surrounding the marital practices of Slovak Jews started to change. With the arrival of ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Myers in 1993, a trained Chabad-Lubavitch and a native of the USA, and in the context of a rapidly changing political atmosphere, numerous shifts have occurred in the characteristics that make a wedding Jewish.

One of the most visible changes was the emerging trend of moving the ritual from a private and intimate sphere – typical of the Second World War and Socialism – back into a more ‘public’ domain. ‘Traditional’ chuppah ceremonies have moved from the ‘safe space’ of the house to the more ‘open’, historically symbolic place of the synagogue garden. The Orthodox synagogue on Heydukova Street, built in 1926, is currently the only synagogue standing in Bratislava. Having survived the Socialist ‘modernisation’ of the city in the 1960s, unlike most of the Jewish quarter and two other synagogues, this site offered the possibility of a chuppah wedding in a place where it used to be held in the past.54

Figure 10: a place for a chuppah in the garden behind the synagogue on Heydukova Street

54 The older Orthodox synagogue, located on Zámocká Street, was demolished in 1961. The Neolog synagogue on Rybné Square was demolished with the rest of the Jewish quarter in 1969, to make space for a motorway bridge across the Danube.
This move towards more ‘public’ weddings, however, occurred on two levels. Apart from the significant change of location involved in taking the wedding outside of a house or other ‘closed places’, the ritual has also been made more ‘public’ by inviting larger numbers of people to come and witness it.

When Lea and Teodor had their chuppah wedding in the garden behind the synagogue, they decided to invite everyone from the Jewish community. “We knew it was a rarity,” Lea explained. While sitting at her kitchen table, I looked through her wedding photo album and listened to her recount the details of the day. Neither Teodor nor Lea come from Bratislava, but their wedding photographs showed many familiar faces. As Lea recalled, they wanted to invite anyone who wanted to see what a ‘traditional’ wedding looked like. Like many other couples, they let the JCC know about the ceremony, and asked them to send out emails to their members and inform people who frequent the centre that everyone was invited.

At a wedding, in general, having witnesses is important. In the post-Socialist context of Slovakia, however, the need for one’s Jewish wedding to be witnessed gains another significant meaning. It is not only the beginning of a new marriage, but the act of choosing to marry ‘traditionally’, and the ability to do so, that young Jews wanted other people to see. The practice of ‘inviting everyone’ in the Jewish community involves inviting people of Jewish descent whom the couple may not even know personally. While non-Jewish friends or relatives may also be invited, an extra effort is made to invite community members. The importance placed on showing, witnessing and recognising highlights the desire of young Jews for a form of social legitimisation, derived from both the rabbi and the rest of the community. For a wedding to have the intended effect, it needs to be witnessed.

By making their ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding a ‘community event’, young couples create a new level of relatedness. Sharing this experience strengthens their own sense of belonging to the Jewish community, but also extends the process of recognition.

While the practice of making their weddings more ‘public’ is typical for young Slovak Jews, it was different when two ‘non-Slovak’ Jews, coming from foreign countries but living in Bratislava, had their wedding in 2013. Deciding what
kind of ceremony to have, Teo and Juliana agreed on an intimate and private chuppah. Their Liberal wedding was officiated by Rabbi Goldstein, and took place in a small town outside of Bratislava. For them, it was important to make the celebration of their marriage personal. Only their closest family members and a few friends were present. No one from the Bratislava Jewish community was invited. Explaining that they felt neither connected to the local Jewish community nor particularly welcomed, Juliana and Teo did not want – and did not feel they needed – any specific recognition from the Slovak Jewish community, and made their ceremony as intimate as possible. Their choice stands in contrast to the choices of young Slovak Jews, for whom a sense of belonging and acceptance play a crucial role. Sharing the experience of a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding, by inviting people they may not even know, and thereby demonstrating their choice ‘publicly’, is a powerful means of achieving social legitimisation and belonging.

While contemporary Jewish weddings are held in more public spaces, these spaces are still specifically ‘Jewish places’, hidden from a sight of passers-by. Invitations – though sent out to the community en masse – are still directed mostly towards the Jewish population. In this sense, contemporary Jewish wedding practice, I argue, is creating a new space that provides both ‘public’ openness and a necessary sense of security. This space, being a sort of ‘private public’ space, could be described as a uniquely ‘Jewish public’.

Though Jewish weddings in Slovakia have not been hidden under protective roofs since 1993, they are still not visible. While they have moved into a more ‘public’ space, the majority of people witnessing, or merely knowing about, the wedding are still Jewish. The practices surrounding weddings thus highlight the ways that young Slovak Jews negotiate their Jewishness and their insecurity, demonstrating the persistent need for a ‘safe space’ close to but yet separate from life outside of the community.
In need of a more ‘neutral’ document

Flipping through the pages of her wedding album, Lea searched for a particular photograph she wanted to show me. “Ha! This is it – our civil wedding.” Among dozens of pictures showing the rare experience of having a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding, at the very end of the album, there were few photographs depicting a simple wedding ceremony at the town hall. While the bride’s gown was the same one she wore during the chuppah ceremony, a few adjustments had been made. She had taken off her coat as her shoulders and arms did not need to be covered, and Teodor had left his tallit at home. Suddenly, in these pictures, there was no visible sign of Jewishness.

Like Lea and Teodor, the majority of couples in Bratislava who had Jewish weddings had decided to have a civil ceremony as well. The reason for this choice was not, however, that their chuppah wedding on its own would not be accepted and recognised by the state – as was the case during Socialism, when a civil wedding was obligatory. The present Family Law of the Slovak Republic states that a marriage is:

(§1) a union between a man and a woman… (§2) contracted through mutual consent… in front of the municipal body… or one of the registered bodies of a church or religious society (Act No. 36/2005).

According to this law, a religious wedding is legal if performed by one of the eighteen officially recognised churches in Slovakia. The Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (CUJRC) is one of these state-recognised, registered churches. And so, a wedding officiated by Rabbi Myers, as a representative of this congregation, is recognised as legal. Nonetheless, most couples had a civil wedding ceremony – whether at a local town hall or another place of their choosing – in addition to their chuppah wedding. 55

Lea explained that they wanted to have what she called “a more ‘neutral’ document” of their matrimony. “It’s better to have a civil document as well, that you can show when you want to have something done – like, for example, at the municipal bureau or other state offices, when changing your surname after the

---

55 The minimal cost for having a civil wedding outside of the town hall, based on the declared permanent address(es) of the couple, is 66 Euro. The final sum is set by the local registry office.
Many young Jews, and also their older kin, believed that it was better that a marriage certificate they might show to people did not have the stamp of the JRC on it. Here, as with other aspects of Jewish life in Slovakia, it became clear that fear is always prevalent. “There is always some fear – not that it would be overruling everything – but there are moments, situations and decisions that are influenced by the fact ‘it was not always rosy’,” added Lea, explaining their motivations for having a civil wedding by referring implicitly to her family’s experiences of the Holocaust and Socialist persecution. The persistent fear of potential antisemitic behaviour and discrimination makes people worried that public knowledge about their Jewish wedding – and thus about their Jewish descent – could at some point in the future put them and their families in danger.

This highlights the tensions and distinctions between what I describe as the ‘Jewish public’ and the public of wider Slovak society. These two levels of ‘public’ are seen to be incompatible, and their separation is key to preserving a sense of security. Young Jews deploy different strategies to negotiate their Jewishness in and between these two spaces.

In the previous chapter, I showed that marrying out of the community is always seen as a risk. Marrying a non-Jewish partner represents the risk of inviting potential danger in, by letting a stranger in – an act that requires a substantial level of courage and trust. Making one’s Jewish wedding public in wider society, however, creates a different and greater level of insecurity. It not only visibly establishes the Jewishness of the couple and their close relatives, but it demonstrates that they care about their Jewishness to an extent that they have found a Jewish partner and sought to have a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding. While, for young Jews, it is important to display these commitments on a community level, within a ‘Jewish public’, it remains dangerous for such knowledge to travel beyond this ‘safe space’.

Although, since 1993, there has been a clear shift surrounding wedding practices towards the ‘public’, young Jews are still trying to keep their Jewishness a private matter. The felt need for cautiousness – demonstrated through the careful separation of their ‘Jewish life’ from the non-Jewish spheres of their everyday existence – contributes to and reinforces the distinction and tension between the ‘safe
space’ of the ‘Jewish public’ and the unpredictable and threatening public of the wider society.

By using the term “more ‘neutral’ document”, Lea nicely illustrates this effort. But what does ‘more neutral’ mean, and why it is sought? In the case of a civil marriage declaration, the document’s apparent neutrality is conveyed by the omission of both religious and ethnic affiliation – ensuring that the document alone cannot make marginality and minority statuses visible where they would be not wanted. Many young Jews, as I was often reminded, are still very careful about whom to tell about their Jewishness. While having a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding and making it ‘public’ within the community was important for these couples, for many, having only a document with a ‘Jewish stamp’ declaring their matrimony is not enough. This strategy of ‘careful concealment’, created through familial experiences of the Holocaust and Socialist persecutions, as I have shown in Chapter One and Three, has been transmitted also to young Jews growing up in an environment reminding them to keep their Jewishness secret. This involves creation of the special space of the ‘Jewish public’ where young Jews feel free to demonstrate their Jewishness, manifest their devotion, gain recognition from the officiating rabbi and the community, and yet keep their Jewish life ‘private’, away from the eyes of a wider non-Jewish public.

**Demonstration matters: Creating distinctions**

In order to have what young Jews consider a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding, both partners must be of a Jewish descent. Because this specific form of wedding ritual is associated with Orthodox practice, it is necessary to prove that both the bride and the groom fulfil the criteria for Jewishness according to the *Halakhah*. Bratislava’s Rabbi Baruch Myers, being trained in the Chabad-Lubavitch tradition, put special emphasis on this condition, and was unwilling to make any compromise in this matter.

As such, only couples who could document their Jewish descent could have a *chuppah* ceremony. To prove their halakhic Jewishness, young people needed to
bring clear and indisputable proof that they were the descendants of Jewish mothers. The most common documents chosen as evidence were the birth certificates of their maternal grandmothers. Depending on the political regime, birth certificates – whether officiated by the state registry or the JRC itself – issued for young Jews’ grandparents, at least until around 1948, would have either the stamp of the JRC on them, or state a person’s religious affiliation, often abbreviated as ‘izr.’ – ‘Israeli(te)’.

Documentation was an important matter for Rabbi Myers, who took time to research the Jewish history of the families in question. Apart from birth certificates, which for many years have served as the best proof of one’s Jewishness at the community level, there were not many other documents that would suffice – with the exception of parents’ or maternal grandparents’ ketubot, marriage contracts.56

By the same logic, as the constant need to prove one’s ‘halakhicness’ was often problematic, many young Jews felt that one of the benefits of having a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding with Rabbi Myers meant that they would have a ketubah document, signed by a respectable figure in Orthodox Judaism. As Lea explained to me, having a ketubah signed by Rabbi Myers served as stable proof of one’s own ‘halakhicness’, and also that of one’s children, securing a form of recognition in Jewish communities all around the world.

Rabbi Myers’ strict stance, while making the chuppah ritual so sought-after and meaningful, created tension between people who were considered ‘Jewish enough’ to have such a wedding, those who, despite being halakhically Jewish, could not, because they chose to marry outside of the community, and those who were cast as simply not ‘Jewish enough’.57 The requirement of proof highlighted and reinforced the distinction – which is also, as we have seen, present in other aspects of community life – between halakhic Jews and people who have only a father or more distant relative who is Jewish.

---

56 The recognition of such marriage contracts, however, depended on the level of Orthodoxy the rite undertook and the rabbi who signed it.
57 It is important to note that the chuppah ritual was available to people marrying for the second time in instances when the first marriage had ended, according to the terms set out by the Halakhah, or had not been officiated under a chuppah. During my fieldwork, I met one Jewish person who had married previously a non-Jewish partner in a civil wedding, and who, after a divorce, married again in a chuppah ceremony.
The impact of this distinction is exacerbated in the context of the SUJY, and in the interaction of its members with the wider Jewish congregation. As we have seen, even within the carefully-constructed ‘safe space’ of the SUJY, where everyone is welcome to explore their Jewishness, young Jews need to negotiate distinctions based on the rules of the Halakhah. The tensions that emerge in that process are intensified when young people who feel Jewish, and are accepted members of the SUJY or even the JRC, face the possibility that they are not ‘Jewish enough’ to have a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding – though their friends are.

Dorota, a young lawyer in her late twenties (whom we have met in Chapter One), was a petite woman, somewhat fragile but energetic, and proud of her Jewishness. The first time I met her was at a Shabbaton dinner organised by the SUJY in early spring of 2013. I was sitting across from Dorota and her then fiancé Samuel, and observed how he gently held her hand while explaining they would like to have a nice Jewish quote about love on their wedding invitations. They were both happy that, after a long time searching, they had found a Jewish life partner. Soon, however, it became obvious that their wedding was not going to take place under a chuppah. Despite the fact that both Dorota and Samuel were members of the SUJY and the JRC, they found themselves ineligible for a chuppah wedding in the synagogue garden. While Samuel came from a religiously endogamous Jewish family, Dorota had only a Jewish father. Although they both strongly identified as Jewish, and took part in various community and SUJY events, Dorota was not Jewish according to the Halakhah.

While the fact was quietly acknowledged by everyone sitting around the large table eating their Shabbat dinner, the topic was swiftly changed to a merrier discussion about choosing wedding rings. Redirecting attention away from this sensitive issue was a safe way of navigating an uncomfortable and embarrassing materialisation of the distinction between those who could have a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding, and those who could not.

For Dorota, the realisation that she was not ‘Jewish enough’, categorised as a non-Jew with Jewish ancestors by Rabbi Myers, and therefore not fully accepted and unable to have the wedding ritual she wanted, was a source of hurt and disappointment. Although she would never openly articulate these emotions in front of
of her Jewish friends, she expressed her disappointment and resentment of Orthodoxy in several ways. She refused to attend the lectures of Rabbi Myers, and even if he was only appearing for a short time during a larger event, she would leave in order to avoid listening to him. The only time I saw her taking part in a community occasion where Rabbi Myers was present, was during the High Holidays, a few weeks after her wedding, when she made an appearance in the synagogue with a scarf covering her hair, signalling her status as a married woman. These holidays are generally considered a social event at which Slovak Jews can meet their Jewish friends. In a way, however, it was also another space where they could at least very briefly demonstrate some devotion to Jewishness and their sense of belonging to the community.

Despite the fact that having a Liberal Jewish wedding might have been an option for them, Dorota and Samuel never considered it as an alternative. For them, as for many young Jews, the Liberal wedding was not sufficiently ‘traditional’ or authentic. It had neither the same status nor the same ability to convey the desired recognition and social legitimisation within the Bratislava Jewish community. Many young Jews I knew would ask, rhetorically: “Why would you go through something less only to have a certain Jewish spirit in the ceremony, if you cannot have the proper Jewish wedding?” While a few couples preferred Liberal weddings, for most they were insufficient to ‘properly’ demonstrate their devotion and gain recognition. Thus, there are two distinctions dividing young Jews: those who have only a civil ceremony are distinguished from those who also have a Jewish wedding; but also those who have a ‘traditional’ chuppah are distinguished from those who decide on a Liberal one.

By choosing between Orthodox and Liberal wedding ceremonies, however, people also made a statement showing their commitment to a particular movement within Judaism. The choice of ceremony, in other words, influenced not only the form and strength of the message conveyed, but also its content. The different statuses attributed to these rituals were also mirrored in the spaces in which they took place. A distinction bound in a symbolic conflict is manifested when only ‘traditional’ weddings could be held in the synagogue garden, while two Liberal
weddings that I knew of in Bratislava were organised in the JCC’s canteen. Each of these spaces was open to different sorts of ‘public’. While a ‘traditional’ wedding was turned into a ‘community event’, a Liberal wedding was considered a more private occasion, with only family and friends present. The civil wedding ceremony is often even more intimate and private.

In the end, Dorota and Samuel had a civil wedding at a hotel outside of Bratislava. It was a private ceremony, with only family and close friends being invited. Despite our conversations about weddings and an intention to help me with my research, Dorota felt her civil wedding was not an event that would interest me. The fact that she saw the wedding as not being Jewish – although, in her eyes, two Jews were getting married – highlights the prevalent perception that what makes a wedding Jewish is the presence of an officiating rabbi, a chuppah, and a ritual involving customs based on tradition.

The bare, private character of this civil wedding, but also of other Liberal weddings that have taken place over the last twenty years, contrasts sharply with the large, ‘traditional’ chuppah ceremonies that are turned into ‘community events’. In Dorota’s case specifically, as well as in many others, there was a level of disappointment and shame around not having a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding – whether the couple had been disallowed from doing so, or had decided not to – that makes young people keep their ‘non-traditional’ weddings intimate and private.\footnote{The main issue I am exploring here is best explained by looking at the strategies of people who are not considered ‘Jewish enough’, or who are halakhically Jewish but marrying outside of the community. I do not discuss in depth the motivations of the few young Jews who were eligible to have a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding, but instead chose to have a Liberal ceremony on the basis of personal preference – nor those who preferred to have only a civil wedding.}

Dorota and Samuel were both active members of the SUJY and the JRC, and both felt strongly Jewish; keeping their ceremony private also, to a certain extent, avoided highlighting the fact that they were not ‘able’ to have a ‘traditional’ chuppah ceremony because one of them is not ‘Jewish enough’. 
When demonstration still matters

As we have seen, in post-Socialist Slovakia, it is very important for some people to demonstrate their Jewishness, and the ritual of a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding is a powerful means to do so. Young Jews who cannot have a chuppah ceremony, but would still like to make a statement and claim their Jewishness, seek ways to incorporate some small Jewish traditions or gestures into their wedding rituals and celebrations. Dorota and Samuel, for example, decided to add a little bit of ‘Jewish spirit’ to their wedding reception by dancing one of their first dances to a klezmer song from a CD. While claiming that their wedding was not Jewish, they still felt comfortable incorporating this gesture without “making it look ridiculous.”

Many people who could not have a chuppah wedding were careful about what Jewish traditions or customs, if any, they incorporated into their ‘non-Jewish’ weddings. Their aim was often to avoid perceptions of ‘artificiality’ and negative judgements from members of the community. The shame and disrespect associated with such efforts, in this sense, contributed to a certain uneasiness, and to the rather private character of their wedding celebrations.

Looking for meaningful yet subtle ways to ‘publicly’ demonstrate one’s devotion to Jewishness on one’s wedding day is also important for people – especially Jewish women – who marry outside of the Jewish community. While men often understood their marrying-out as likely to result in a distancing from the community, which would be unlikely to welcome their non-Jewish wives and children, many did not find manifestation of their allegiance as significant as for Jewish women who married out. The fact that children of mixed marriages would be seen to be Jewish only when their mothers were halakhically Jewish played a substantial role in women’s choices, and also in their level of participation at community events following their out-marriage. Most Jewish women, knowing this rule of the Halakhah, felt strongly about showing their continued allegiance – through incorporating Jewish music, dances, decoration or meals – and used their weddings to signal their intentions to raise their children as Jewish.

As we saw in Chapter Four, Barbora was committed to finding a Jewish husband, and to having a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding, as both her grandparents
and parents had done. But despite her efforts, none of her Jewish relationships felt right, and she eventually decided to look beyond the Jewish community for a partner. Having met a suitable partner shortly thereafter, who respected her Jewishness and her desire to bring their children up as Jewish, she felt no need to search any further.

Despite saying her “I dos” to a non-Jewish man in a small civil ceremony at a local town hall, Barbora still felt that it was important to demonstrate her devotion to Jewishness and the heritage of her ancestors. Although there was not much space to incorporate larger Jewish traditions in the wedding, it was crucial for her that the wedding should not take place on Saturday – as do most religious and civil weddings in Slovakia. The fact that, according to the Jewish law, a wedding should not be held during Shabbat (see Kaplan 1983: 35) was a principle of Jewishness Barbora wanted to keep at least symbolically. “I did not want to have my wedding during a Shabbat, and we had to pay more to avoid it,” she explained. The current Law of Registry says that weddings can take place on Saturdays between 11:00 am and 17:00 pm. If a couple wants to get married outside of this set time and day, they need to pay a fee.59

In the end, Barbora married her husband in a small and very private ceremony on Friday morning, with only their family members and a few closest friends present. For her, it was very important to show that marrying out did not change the fact that she is Jewish and still cares about the heritage of her ancestors. Her husband, being non-religious himself, respected and supported her wishes. Although not witnessed by the whole ‘Jewish public’, she needed to demonstrate these commitments at least to her relatives and friends, and, in a way, to herself.

Dagmar had a very similar experience. She came from a Jewish family with a long endogamous history. While she was not brought up in a practicing environment, her Jewish roots and the legacy of her ancestors meant a lot to her. After two unsuccessful relationships with Jewish men, and upon realising her “children will be Jewish anyway”, she started to date non-Jewish men and eventually fell in love. Although she dreamt of having a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding under a chuppah, they had a simple civil wedding ceremony at a town hall. “As we have only the Orthodox rabbi here, my husband would need to convert and he did not want to. So there was

59 To be allowed to have a civil (or a religious) wedding outside of the set time and date a couple must pay a minimum sum of 16.50 Euro. The final sum is set by the local registry office, depending on where the wedding takes place.
no other possibility, we had to have just a civil wedding.” Having been raised Catholic, her husband was ambivalent about the nature of the ceremony, and preferred to have a civil rite than a religious one. Despite the small size and civil character of her wedding, Dagmar invited her Jewish relatives from the USA and Israel to come and witness her getting married.

The meeting of the two families – one Jewish, one Catholic – made the wedding day an especially lively occasion. In a soft voice, Dagmar admitted: “I didn’t know whether they knew or not – I still haven’t told his extended family what I am – that I am a Jew.” Her Slovak wording, ‘čo som zač’ (what I am), was a very strong statement that made clear she considered herself to be different. For Dagmar, her Jewishness was something she felt she could not share with everyone – not even with her husband’s family. These reactions – in contrast to her desire for a sense of belonging in the Jewish community – highlight the carefully-guarded boundary between the ‘Jewish public’ and the public of Slovak society. While one’s Jewishness is not something that one wishes to manifest outside of the ‘Jewish public’, young Jews nonetheless value the demonstration of their devotion to Jewishness within the ‘safe space’ of the community.

To establish a continuing sense of belonging to the Jewish community, when Dagmar invited her relatives living abroad to her interfaith wedding ceremony, she asked them to bring her gifts for a Jewish family life – things that, as she put it, she “would not be able to buy in this region.” Her aunt, coming from New York, gave her a silver Hanukiah; and her father’s cousins, who live in Israel, brought two beautiful Shabbat candlesticks. She kept all these objects on a display shelf. They were not used for the purposes for which they were meant. But they materialised a significant connection to Jewish traditions, and ‘traditional’ Jewish life. Asking for such gifts was an act – an open demonstration of devotion – saying that even though she had married out and had a civil wedding, Dagmar’s Jewish roots will continue to play an important role in her life. Moreover, via these objects, her Jewishness will be visible at her new home, where her Jewish children will be brought up.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that people’s ideas about what makes a wedding Jewish have changed over time – under the influence of changing political regimes, and shifts in demography and local knowledge affected by the Shoah, waves of emigration in 1945-1948, 1968-1969 and after 1989, and the arrival of Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbi Myers in 1993. Currently, for young Jews, having a Jewish wedding manifests itself as a practice which I describe as a return to an ‘unknown’ tradition. In order for a wedding to be considered Jewish, it must take a form unlike that experienced by Slovak Jews’ parents or even grandparents.

Young Jews who want to have a ‘traditional’ Jewish wedding must fulfil requirements and rules they often find limiting. However, given that these limitations confer authenticity on the ritual, many find ways to satisfy the requirements. This putting on and taking off of ‘tradition’ – like a ‘Chabad-appropriate layer’ for a wedding dress – was a frequent strategy deployed by young Jews in negotiating their Jewishness, the tension between local Ashkenazi and Chabad customs, and personal or familial ideas of how a Jewish wedding should appear. Wedding ‘traditions’, if not quite invented (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Ochs 2007), are remade or innovated in a constant conversation between local Ashkenazi and Chabad perspectives, Slovak popular culture, and changes taking place in ritual performance among Jewish communities abroad. Thus, I suggest that what makes a wedding Jewish depends on who is assessing it, and tends to change with time. But for young Jews in Bratislava today, a wedding is ‘traditionally’ Jewish when it fulfils Orthodox requirements, and has an ‘authentic’ form recognised by Rabbi Myers – and thus, significantly, by the Orthodox Jewish communities around the world.

Having a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding, I argue, is a powerful means to demonstrate one’s devotion to Jewishness, the heritage of one’s ancestors, and a sense of belonging to the Jewish community. The strength of this ‘costly ritual’ (Sosis 2003, 2005) lies in its exclusiveness – set by strict requirements of descent – which contributes to a sense of recognition, acceptance, and solidarity. Especially for young Jews who face everyday conflict around ‘identity politics’ in post-Socialist Slovakia, having such a wedding and inviting the whole Jewish community to
witness it produces stable proof of one’s ‘halakhicness’, and achieves social legitimisation. Undergoing a ‘traditional’ chuppah rite has the power to engender lasting recognition even to ‘new Jews’, like Lea, who have an ambiguous status saturated with mistrust (as discussed in Chapter Two), by giving a strong signal of their allegiance. The way Jewish weddings are organised, however, reveals persistent fear and feelings of insecurity. Young Jews employ ‘careful concealment’ at weddings as well as elsewhere; they celebrate their chuppah only in the space of the ‘Jewish public’, and often decide to have a civil wedding ceremony in order to acquire a “more ‘neutral’ document” to be shown outside of this ‘safe space’.

This stretching and shrinking of the ‘private’ and ‘public’, I argue, is a fundamentally political process, rather than simply a religious one. As I have shown, the space where a wedding ritual was celebrated, as well as its form (and openness to the ‘public’), was highly affected by political regimes. From relatively private chuppah ceremonies organised in the backyard of parental houses during the Second World War, the secularising policies and anti-Jewish stance of Socialist Czechoslovakia pushed Jewish weddings into even more private, ‘inside’ spaces. The previously intimate spaces of bedrooms, in turn, became more ‘public’ (see Pine 1996) when hosting the chuppah wedding, while keeping it secret from people who should not know.

Today’s ‘traditional’ chuppah weddings, as I have shown, are held in the ambivalent space of the ‘Jewish public’. This separate space – being neither private nor completely public – enables young Jews to transform their weddings into ‘community events’, creating room for the demonstration of their devotion and allegiance, and gaining social recognition, while keeping it hidden from non-Jewish others. The elasticity of the private/public divide empowers Slovak Jews to navigate their Jewishness through donning or taking off the ‘tradition’ and signs of Jewishness as desired. The sense of two ‘publics’ – the Jewish and the majority one – as I have shown, facilitates performance of Jewishness and demonstration within the ‘Jewish public’, as well as veiling of the perceived otherness based on religious and ethnic affiliation, avoiding othering and feared discrimination. While the boundary separating them is elastic, it is intensely guarded.
Young Jews try to convey distinct messages to each of these ‘publics’. Documents created by the state to legitimise its citizens and make them legible (see Scott 1998; Lambek 2013a) – such as grandparents’ birth certificates – make one’s Jewish ‘otherness’ visible. On the one hand, they are experienced as discriminating (and bear associations with the troubled past of the Shoah); but on the other, they play a crucial role in proving one’s Jewishness in a highly politicised context saturated with mistrust. The ketubah and the wedding certificate signed by Rabbi Myers take their place among such powerful ‘legitimising’ documents; but while invaluable within the ‘Jewish public’, they unveil sensitive information that must be guarded from the non-Jewish public.

The specific character of such wedding rites, with their limitations and signs of authenticity, and the meanings associated with them – as well as their orientation towards the future, while showing that the past matters in the present – enables young Jews to communicate a strong and compelling message. Standing under a chuppah and having one’s wedding officiated by Rabbi Myers demonstrates that both the bride and the groom are halakhically Jewish, but it also shows that their Jewishness was important enough to them that they were willing to undergo the struggle of finding a Jewish partner and decided to start their married life with a Jewish wedding ceremony. This ritual, being witnessed by the ‘people who matter’, enables the couple to ‘publicly’ demonstrate their devotion and sense of belonging, but also facilitates the creation of these notions. A chuppah wedding is not only a lens showing the level of devotion that already exists, but it is also an act through which these dispositions are enacted, observed, recognised and strengthened.

Because not everyone can have a chuppah wedding ritual, tensions emerge between people who can have such a wedding and those who feel strongly Jewish but cannot, either because they choose to marry exogamously or are not ‘Jewish enough’. The ability or inability to choose – between an Orthodox, Liberal or civil wedding ceremony – creates a significant distinction among young Jews. A desire to demonstrate their commitment and assert that their Jewishness will not change after marriage was especially evident among young Jewish women marrying out of the community. By incorporating small Jewish wedding customs, they demonstrated that
gender and the fact that their children will be Jewish matters and distinguishes them from their male counterparts.

In this sense, a *chuppah* wedding emerges as a powerful ritual that conveys a very important message. Because its form and the requirements surrounding it change over time and within particular contexts, it is a very significant space of negotiation for young Slovak Jews’ experience of Jewishness, and perceptions of the past, present and imagined future within the Jewish community. The following chapter explores the ways young Jews navigate their choices and the considerations involved in bringing up children.
Chapter Six

‘Making Them Jewish’: Bringing up the Next Generation

“I hadn’t even given birth yet, and people were already asking about the name, or who will be performing the circumcision,” Dagmar explained, remembering the acute pressure she felt from both her family and the Jewish community. As we learned in the previous chapter, having a ‘traditional’ chuppah wedding is a powerful means to demonstrate one’s devotion. When children are born, however, young Jews – those who married endogamously, and especially those who married out of the community – need to prove their intention to bring their children up as Jewish. While the principles of transmission of Jewishness according to the Halakhah created a sense of advantage among out-marrying Jewish women, who were assured their children would be Jewish regardless, the advantage turns into responsibility when the children are born. As choices surrounding the upbringing of children are closely monitored by the community, young parents are pressured to provide new proof of their investment in the socio-cultural reproduction of Jewishness, in order to gain recognition and to protect the reputations of their respective families.

In this chapter, I consider how young Jews in Bratislava understand their Jewishness by exploring their plans, choices and decisions involved in bringing up their children. Specifically, I follow three main areas where these issues became visible: the process of choosing a name and naming; decisions surrounding the circumcision of their sons; and the choices they make concerning the education of their children – at kindergarten, at school, or at home. In the following three sections, I demonstrate that these decisions not only shed light on how young Jews want their children to understand their Jewishness, but also on how those young parents communicate important messages of allegiance and devotion to the Jewish community in the uncertain context of everyday life in Slovakia.

Building on my argument from previous chapters, I show how young Jews engage in the stretching and shrinking of the ‘private’ and ‘public’, and employ this
elasticity specifically to create two distinct ‘publics’. While they want to, and also feel a need to, demonstrate allegiance with the ‘Jewish public’, they strive to keep Jewishness hidden outside of that ‘safe space’, from the unpredictable wider public. I argue that visibility as well as invisibility are crucial ways of performing one’s identification with Jewishness (see also Sözer 2014) in post-Socialist Slovakia. Choices and practices surrounding naming, circumcision and education, as I show below, are performative acts (see Lambek 2013a,b) enabling young Jews to communicate a specific message to a chosen audience, while striking a balance between preserving (in)visibility and conveying meaning.

Names, in particular, have the power to communicate kinship, religious and ethnic affiliation (see Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006; Scott 1998; Das and Copeman 2015; Copeman 2015), and to serve as signs of belonging as well as otherness (see Brink-Danan 2010, 2012). Among young Slovak Jews, the process of naming shows an effort to choose a name that will fulfil the criteria of meaning and (in)visibility – thus, a name of Hebrew origin, highlighting identification with and honouring the heritage of their ancestors, while at the same time ‘sounding Slovak’ enough to pass as ‘not-different’ and to prevent othering. The performative act of naming is, I argue, employed to make children as well as their parents feel ‘more Jewish’, and to convey an important message of continuing allegiance to a ‘Jewish public’ able to decipher it.

Circumcision is often cast as a ritual of kinship (Cannell 2007: 121; see also Carsten 1997: 121-123, 2004: 72-73; Douglas 1966: 115-117; Lambek 2013b; Bloch 1992). It marks the physical body, and, for Slovak Jews, it creates a male Jewish person (see also Wright 2003, 2012; Bilu 2003; Goldberg 2003). Producing sameness as well as difference, the permanent mark of circumcision engenders conflict and creates a distinction between those who decide to circumcise their sons, and those who do not. Because of the permanence of this bodily act and its strong ritual meaning – permeated with politics and associated with social status in the Jewish community – deciding to have one’s son circumcised is a powerful means to prove allegiance even in instances of intermarriage. The knowledge of whether someone’s son has been circumcised, or not, travels across communal life, and affects not only the status of the child, but also that of his parents and the reputation of his family.
Young Jews – in endogamous as well as exogamous marriages – negotiate this choice in light of health, fear and insecurity, identity politics, but also ethics, realising the crucial role it plays for communal recognition.

Beyond these decisions, another important choice young parents face regards the extent of Jewish education – at home, but also outside of it. Exploring childrearing practices sheds light on questions of continuity and change in socio-cultural reproduction (see Fader 2009; McGinity 2009; Fishman 2004; Dencik 2009), as well as the production of social distinctions (see Bourdieu 1984). As most young Jews I studied were only planning or starting their families and many had small children, choosing a kindergarten – and deciding between the Chabad (ultra-Orthodox Jewish), NEMO (partly-Jewish), or ‘secular’ option – was a significant matter.60 This choice, situated within Bratislava’s specific socio-political context, indexed their allegiance and belonging, as well as foretelling their commitment towards bringing their children up to be Jewish.

While wanting to raise their children to a ‘more positive Jewishness’ in comparison to their own – which was often saturated with a negative history, located in the post-Shoah transmission of loss (as discussed in Chapter Three; see also Feuchtwang 2011) – young Jewish parents’ decisions and practices were still influenced by a sense of insecurity. They sought ways to make their children ‘more Jewish’ and to instil pride, but also taught their children to compartmentalise their lives, carefully inscribing boundaries between the ‘safe space’ of home, the ‘Jewish public’, and the unpredictable outside. Together with Jewishness and other values, I argue, young Jewish parents also transmit fear and strategies of ‘careful concealment’ to their children; and in this sense, they reproduce some aspects of their own upbringing. More than twenty years after the Velvet Revolution, however, there was also a significant shift. Young parents learned to recognise that making their devotion to Jewishness and the heritage of their ancestors visible within the ‘Jewish public’ was vital for social recognition and acceptance in the politicised context of post-Socialist Slovakia. Feeling different to the non-Jewish majority, young Jews strive for a sense of inclusion in a space where such ‘otherness’ can be shared.

60 NEMO is an invented name for this kindergarten to avoid any possible identification.
Naming: Creating (and hardening) links

It was a Wednesday evening in summer, after the rabbi’s weekly Torah seminar, and a group of us had decided to go for a dinner together. We walked from the JCC across the Old Town to a brewery restaurant. As soon as we ordered, Alena bluntly raised a question: “So what Jewish names do you know that do not sound obviously Jewish?” Most people just looked at her perplexed, waiting for some elucidation. Seeing the startled reaction her question caused, she lowered her voice and explained that, although she was still single, she was already thinking about it because she wanted to bring her children up as Jewish. She wanted them to be proud of their heritage, and having a name that meant something would be important. “I am looking for names that have Jewish origins, but sound Slovak or Christian too,” she said, adding, “you know, not to be too obvious.” The conversation quickly evolved into a brainstorming of names that would fit these criteria. Most popular were Dávid, Jakub and Samuel for boys, and Sára or Gabriela for girls.

While this question surprised people around the table, it did not come out of nowhere. The issue of name-choosing – and ways of balancing meaning with concealment and visibility – was on the minds of many young Jews.

According to the law of the Slovak Republic, a child must be named as soon as possible, and that name should be recorded at the local registry office within three days of birth. The ‘Law of Names and Surnames’ (Act No. 300/1993) further specifies that a person of the male sex cannot receive a female name and vice versa. The process of name registering requires both parents to agree on the chosen name and declare their agreement by their signatures.

Given these stipulations, young Jews start to discuss possible names for their children well in advance, so that they will be able to welcome their new-born with an already chosen name – or at least several well-picked options. While talking about names with people intensifies over the course of the pregnancy, the final choice is
often kept secret until the baby is born, with the belief that sharing it would be unlucky.

Certain names are avoided, including, for instance, those associated with the category of “old-people’s names.” “I could not have named my baby girl Eugenia, although I would have liked to. It was my grandmother’s name, but I didn’t have the heart to do that. It would be terrible. Children would laugh.” Jarmila, a halakhic Jew who had married out, decided instead to choose the name Hana – which, as Jarmila argues, is connected to the name Eugenia because they are both translated in Hebrew as Chana.

Another concern among some Jews was the pronounceability of names outside of the Central and Eastern European geographic region. This brought to the fore another group of names that most preferred to avoid – “very Slavic names.” Names like Slavomír or Vieroslav were relatively unpopular for these reasons. For many people, especially young Jews, it was important that the name they chose could be easily pronounced because, as Alena often remarked, “we never know how long we will live here, and also people travel and study abroad these days.” Reflecting on familial histories – when members of their families emigrated abroad after the Second World War, in 1968-1969 or after 1989 – young Jews’ choices were highly affected by perceptions of future opportunities and uncertainties, imagined in the light of past and present political situations. The most important consideration for young Jews, however, was the balance between names fulfilling the criteria of meaning and (in)visibility.

**Names that bear meaning: Getting closer to one’s heritage**

According to the statistical data of the Registry, the most popular names given to all children in Slovakia in 2013 were Jakub, Adam, and Samuel for boys; and Nela, Natália, and Ema for girls. Young parents, in both the majority Slovak society and the Jewish minority, often found their inspiration in novels, films or telenovelas; but most young Jews turned to historical and religious texts or their genealogies for inspiration. Some names, however – like Samuel and Michaela, for example – were
popular among both the Jewish minority and the wider public. While non-Jews might associate them with the Bible, or reflect on them as ‘nice names’, for young Jews these names bear an additional message, and create an important link to the Jewish past or Jewishness as an imagined category.

“It was very important for me that my son should have a name with Hebrew origin,” Dagmar explained. “The symbolism was important. I always wanted my children to know these traditions and to know who their ancestors were, where they come from. So that they wouldn’t be told by someone from outside.” Although Dagmar, a halakhic Jew herself, married outside of the Jewish community, it was crucial that the name she chose for her son would “mean something.” She wanted the name to have a Hebrew origin to remind her son of his Jewish ancestry. She had searched online for names that would fulfil this criterion, as many others do as well, and had been considering five main options: Dávid, Šimon, Jakub and Michal for a boy; and, in case it was a girl – the choice was simple as both Dagmar and her husband agreed on one name – Gabriela. “All Jewish names,” she noted, proudly. As her non-Jewish husband was not keen on naming his son Dávid, and since there was already a young boy named Jakub on his side of the family, in the end they named their son Michal – a choice they felt sounded better with a Slovak surname.

Many couples took the process of choosing a name for their child very seriously, and, as laid out by the law, they both had to agree on the chosen name before it could be officially given to a child. The possibility of partners, especially non-Jewish spouses, disagreeing with certain names concerned many young Jews. As Dagmar explained, “it was important that both of us agreed on it and so we chose Michal.” In Jarmila’s case, however, the decision did not go so smoothly. While she wanted to name her son Dávid, her husband wished to name him after his father – Benjamin. Making a compromise on that name enabled and also motivated Jarmila, a few years later, to stand firmly behind her decision to name their daughter Hana.

Giving their children names that “mean something” became a crucial aspect of welcoming a new person in the world. Young Jews often conducted research to make sure that the names they were considering had Hebrew origins, and to find out what they actually represented. Sources like the Internet or books about names were important means young Jews used to determine the origin and meaning of names,
and to make an informed decision. But why were these naming practices so important for a generation of young Jews who themselves were often given non-Jewish names?

In many ways, what a name does is connected to the initial process of naming and what it is thought to do, and young Jews’ motivations in naming their children sheds light on their own identification with Jewishness. Often “the power of names lies not in their linguistic meaning, but in the name itself” – therefore we should ask what names are “as well as what they signify” (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006: 6; see also Lambek 2006; Bodenhorn 2006; Humphrey 2006).

The significance young Jews attributed to choosing names for their children, and the means they used to do so, cast naming as a powerful performative act that reaches beyond the simple ‘allocation’ of terms of address. Many young Jews would often explain their choices by arguing that they wanted their children to “know where they come from,” to be aware and proud of their Jewish heritage. These names were chosen for a reason – to make both their recipients, and their recipients’ parents, feel Jewish. Whereas young Jews would claim names are chosen primarily for their children, the whole process of naming – from discussing names when people are still single and childless, via doing research and searching for meaning and origin, to defending their choices, naming their children, and proudly recounting the Hebrew origin of the chosen names – demonstrates that it is equally important for the parents themselves.

While a name is a crucial means of connecting a child to Jewishness, influencing its personhood, giving a ‘Jewish’ name seems to be at least as important as receiving it. The fact that many young Jews choose to give their children names with Hebrew origins, symbolically returning to yet other ‘unknown traditions’, signifies their identification with their Jewishness, and their hope that their children will feel this connection too. However, as young Jews themselves need to search for these names, the question arises: how do names become meaningful, and for whom? What sort of knowledge is important?
**Issues of visibility**

Whenever I was present when someone was discussing names, or when young parents pointed out the Hebrew origins of their child’s name, young Jews would always make clear that it was important for the name to “sound Slovak” or “not too Jewish.” This effort to veil Jewishness sheds light on the power names have to make people and their affiliations problematically legible to the state (see Scott 1998; Lambek 2013a), as well as to establish not only belonging, but also difference (see Brink-Danan 2010, 2012).

During Socialism, there was a concerted effort to conceal Jewishness by choosing non-Jewish names that would enable their bearers to ‘blend in’. This practice resulted in most young Jews – and often their parents as well – having names that were indistinguishable from their non-Jewish contemporaries. As we have seen, this was one practice through which young Jews, like Alena, learned from their parents about the importance of ‘hiding’ Jewishness. “When I was little I told my mum that I wanted to be named Sára,” Alena told me one day. “She explained that giving me such a name with my clearly Jewish surname during Socialism would be like tattooing židovskú hviezdu (the Star of David) on my forehead.”

But in the politicised context of the Jewish community after the revolution in 1989, many young Jews felt both a need and often a desire to create links to their heritage. Due to the visibility of forenames, people strove to find ‘neutral’ names that would incorporate knowledge of and create connections to Jewishness, without revealing ‘otherness’ to the non-Jewish public. Naming practices, thus, require young Jews to negotiate the tensions arising from their preferences between making a statement of devotion and giving their children names with Hebrew origins, and ‘veiling’ the Jewishness of their bearers so they can pass as Slovak. This need to ‘camouflage’ has always been present for the Jewish community, and their naming preferences, though seemingly contradictory, were articulated together.

What motivated this strategy of ‘careful concealment’ was an ever-present worry about discrimination and fear of potential antisemitic behaviour or reactions of the wider public. Especially so when children are at risk. “A name should be chosen carefully, because it will affect a child’s life – it cannot be visibly Jewish,” Oliver
explained. “The first name should sound neutral or Slovak, so that they won’t be laughed at or picked on by their schoolmates. Even children can be cruel.” For these reasons, young Slovak Jews will not consider naming their children Mordechai or Ayelet, but rather try to find alternatives that draw less negative attention.

Instead, young Slovak Jews seek names for their children that will communicate different messages to two distinct audiences – the ‘Jewish public’, and the wider public. It is the family’s and the Jewish community’s recognition of the name and its connotations that matters most. The knowledge that assures understanding – within the ‘safe space’ of the ‘Jewish public’ – represents a sort of ‘secret’ information of attachment, veiled by a form of commonality that allows these apparently neutral names to “blend in” or discretely pass as ‘not other’.

Great care is taken to choose a name that both sounds and looks inconspicuously Slovak. Young parents, for example, prefer Jakub to Jacob or Jakob. Barbora described her own success in this endeavour by recounting a time when a woman in her daughter’s kindergarten commented: “Ah, Dana – what a beautiful Slovak name!” – inferring its ‘traditional’ Slovak folk quality, but overlooking an additional Jewish meaning.

Names – with the ability to reveal information about kinship, gender, religion or ethnicity – have the capacity to mark socio-cultural boundaries, but “also [to] provide the vehicle for crossing boundaries between those very same categories, as well as between life and death, past and future” (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006: 3-4). It is precisely this capacity for crossings bestowed on children by parents through carefully chosen ‘neutral’ names that enables them to reveal this information in one context while concealing it in another, depending on context and shared knowledge. What is communicated by a name depends largely on background knowledge about its potential meanings and origins, and even the realisation of the possibility to look for it.

Naming, therefore, is a ‘creative action’, and names are “potentially powerful artifacts” (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006: 10). For young Jews, the process of choosing their children’s names serves as a performative act enabling them to demonstrate their own devotion to Jewishness, while connecting the present and future with the past.
‘Veiled names’: Names travelling in time

Young Jews often choose to honour the memory of their ancestors by giving their names to their children. In practice, this choice takes two possible forms: using the names of late kin as Jewish middle names, or as (sometimes slightly altered) forenames.

Jewish naming customs around choosing a Jewish middle name – which is significant for religious purposes in an individual’s life – differ between Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. Although often unaware of this distinction, Slovak Jews followed the Ashkenazi practice. While among Sephardim it is customary to name children after a living, honoured member of the family, within Ashkenazi circles it is unimaginable, and one can only name a child after a deceased ancestor.

This practice is taken very seriously in the Slovak Jewish community, and it affected naming practices for forenames as well. First (secular or civil) names were chosen carefully in order to avoid having two ‘living’ people with the same name in the family. Dagmar’s choice for her son’s name was one such example. She liked the name Jakub very much, but there was already a small boy named Jakub on her husband’s side of the family, and so Michal was chosen instead. In contrast to the Slovak majority, where it is not unusual for sons to be named after their fathers or daughters after their mothers, I have never come across a situation where a Jewish child shared their name with living kin in the Jewish community. As Alena said, “it doesn’t happen that you would name your child after someone who is still alive. We don’t do that.” Repeating names and naming a child after a relative thus happens only when this practice crosses the boundary of ‘life and death’.

For young Jews, choosing a name for their child is a very important issue. Some, often those who were brought up with similar customs, put a lot of emphasis on giving their children also Jewish middle names – or “ritual names.” Deciding which of their ancestors to honour by naming a child after them is crucial. Most people choose a grandparent or great-grandparent of their child’s gender, usually from the maternal side. Barbora’s daughters were both given Jewish middle names.
“We named them after my deceased relatives – the older one after my granny and the younger daughter after my auntie. We wanted to secure the continuity here. It wasn’t even a question.” While Jarmila was not given a Jewish middle name herself during Socialism, she received one in a naming ceremony when she visited Israel several years ago. Finding this step to be very important in creating a link between the Jewish past, present and future, she gave her daughter a middle name after her deceased mother – Feiga.

Sometimes names are chosen for the specific ancestor and their qualities. I would often hear people comparing their children to late family members, saying, “she was very intelligent and optimistic, and we named our daughter Rebeka after her”; or noting a young boy’s stubbornness as “just like his namesake.” In this sense, names seem to “embody the attributes of others” (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 2006: 18). At other times, names would be chosen “because the other names are already living among us,” in order to avoid the repetition of names among ‘living’ offspring.

Crucially, ‘ritual names’ are not recorded on any official documentation. They are hidden from the sight of people who should not know about them, and appear only on special occasions in an individual’s life. They are pronounced aloud when they are actually given – for a girl, usually at the first Torah reading after the birth, and for a boy, at his circumcision ceremony – and then when a man is called to read from the Torah, during the person’s wedding and his funeral.61 Ritual names accompany Jews through their life cycle, while simultaneously connecting them to the past and the future.

Choosing ‘ritual names’ is not, however, equally important – or even possible – for all young Jews. Some young parents, whether their children are halakhic or not, look for other ways to honour their ancestors in their child’s life without tying it to a religious act. Alena, being one of them, argued that for her, despite having a Jewish middle name herself, it was more important that her children should have a first (civil) name that reminds them of their Jewish origin. Just as Jarmila chose a translation of her grandmother’s name for her daughter, Alena wanted to name her son Max – after her grandfather.

61 These names appear on a ketubah if the couple decides to have a Jewish wedding, and sometimes on a person’s gravestone if buried at a Jewish cemetery.
I want my son to share a name with my grandfather, and I think it’s more important that it be the civil name because that’s the one that he’ll use most often. It’s recorded and he’ll use it to introduce himself. I want him to identify as a Jew through this name.

Some young Jews, like Alena and Jarmila, thus use the forename of their ancestors (in an original or altered form) as the basis for their children’s first names, highlighting the visibility and tangibility of the connection to Jewishness and their ancestors.

**Circumcision: Making Jewish bodies**

The welcoming of a newborn baby into the community, associated with giving a Jewish middle name, takes two forms depending on gender. The birth of a girl is announced during the first Torah reading at the synagogue. The naming of a daughter, accompanied with blessings, can take place on Mondays, Thursdays or other special days when the Torah is read. Most people wait until the Shabbat following the birth, when the greatest number of people from the community gather for the service. For male children, being welcomed into the Jewish community and receiving a ‘ritual name’ is directly linked to the *brit milah* (Hebrew for the ‘covenant of circumcision’) or *bris* (the Yiddish equivalent, used widely among Slovak Jews in Bratislava). The ritual of circumcision, involving the removal of the foreskin on the eighth day after birth (see Genesis 17: 9-14; Leviticus 12: 3), is understood as “a sign of the covenant made between God and Abraham and his descendants” (Wright 2003: 99).

While according to the *Halakhah* all children – both male and female – are Jewish if born to a Jewish mother, the rite of *obriezka* (Slovak for circumcision) marks official “membership of the Jewish people” (Wright 2012: 90; Bilu 2003). It is the marking of the physical body that bears this powerful symbolic meaning. The *bris* as a performative act not only marks the gender, but also creates a Jewish male person. The direct bodily effect and its symbolism bring together tensions surrounding issues of health, personhood, distinction, recognition and choice.
The social role of *bris*

Young Jews in Slovakia who decide to have their sons circumcised are faced with another choice – who will perform this act, and where. As there is no rule saying where a *bris* should take place (Wright 2003: 99), people can organise this ritual at the synagogue, the JCC, at home, or in a hospital. As Bratislava does not have a *mohel*, a professionally trained circumciser, young Jews usually invite one from Vienna or Budapest. A few, however, decided to have their son’s *bris* performed by a doctor in a hospital. “Then it is enough to have the rabbi present during the procedure so that he can say the blessings and give the ritual name.” While a few couples went with this option, reasoning that it was more hygienic and safer, the majority of Slovak Jews – when deciding to go with this rite at all – preferred to ask a *mohel*. Whether inviting one to come to Slovakia to perform the circumcision or travelling for this occasion to Vienna, as a few couples did, the use of a *mohel* was always spoken of as being “more traditional.”

During my fieldwork, there were several young Jews who were considering whether to circumcise their sons – and still others who had already done so. When Lea and Teodor found they were expecting a boy, the conversation about whether to have a *bris* or not arose within the family. Both sets of the grandparents-to-be made their attitudes clear: Teodor’s parents took the “traditional stance”, arguing that a *bris* is a tradition and thus should be done; but Lea’s parents, living in an exogamous union, left the decision to their daughter and her husband, emphasising their personal choice.

The need to make a decision one way or the other became pressing as the expected date of birth approached. “There was much to be organised, as a *bris* must take place on the eighth day,” Lea noted. The rabbi and people from the community were also asking about their plans. For Lea and Teodor, as for several other couples, it was not an easy decision. “We were thinking about it and discussing it for a long time – it was not automatic, without any thought.”
In the end they decided to have their son circumcised, and invited a mohel from Budapest to perform the procedure. “You know, obriezka is now also popular among other couples here. While some decide to have it done in a hospital, I think the way a mohel does it is best,” Lea said, adding, “although it’s nicer when it’s done in a hospital, as they do it precisely. But they also anaesthetize and fasten the child down, and that’s really not necessary.” As Lea recalled of her son’s bris, “It was done in a second – I had no idea when the actual ritual act itself happened. Simon was totally fine – we, the adults, were more stressed about it.” The anticipation of the act was worrying, but for Lea and Teodor what followed brought about another sort of anxiety. Taking care of the wound and nursing their son after the bris was not easy for the first-time parents. “We didn’t know how to accurately guess when to take off the bandage. So we hardly slept for two days. We were more troubled with how to take care of it, than the actual cutting. It was the first time in my life I saw a circumcision.” Their fear and worry turned into a sort of ‘parental trauma’ when, on the third day after the bris, they discovered their son was experiencing problems with healing. “We started to panic, asking ourselves what wrong we have done to him. Nothing bad happened, but for a while we had our doubts.” Getting through and reflecting on the bris experience, Teodor and Lea stated: “It’s something that we did with no pleasure whatsoever – and if we have another son, we will do it again with no pleasure.”

In deciding about their son’s bris, Lea and Teodor considered the range of effects the ritual would have on their son’s life. The two main concerns that most influenced their decision I would describe in terms of ‘fitting in’ and recognition. Lea explained, “We were searching and talking about the possibilities of whether and how he would actually be accepted in the community. I told Teodor that this is something that is always known in the community – who is and who isn’t circumcised.” In an effort to solve their dilemma, Lea decided to ask Rabbi Myers “whether an uncircumcised man would be counted as a Jew.” He was noncommittal, explaining that it was a complex issue. His reaction brought back bitter recollections of how many young Jews were faced with the need to prove their (halakhic) Jewishness. Lea concluded that not undergoing the bris could result in more problems than benefits for her son. “Simply, it’s as if [people will ask] ‘why are you
setting yourself apart from the community?” Resignedly, she pointed out, “One way or another, if anything bad should happen, everyone always knows who Jews are. I think that by not circumcising him we wouldn’t have protected him – he would just be wondering why he is different from Jewish boys or men in the community to which we avow.” The issue of not being different was also important on another level. As Lea said, for her, “The reason that won, was that I wanted him to be the same way as his dad. How would we explain it to him? This kind of thing can’t be explained, we need to live it. Although on the other hand, there’s always fear or worry.”

For many young parents, like Lea and Teodor, deciding whether to have their sons circumcised or not is influenced by issues of health, fear, sameness or otherness, acceptance and recognition. It was important for Lea that her son would be like his father and the rest of the men in the community. Her argument – which, of course, left out the uncircumcised male members of the JRC – suggested that circumcision, and the bodily memory it involves, creates something more than just a sign of belonging, but itself brings about social recognition. Observing how people talked about bris and their decisions and actions surrounding this act, we can see that a rite of circumcision among Slovak Jews involves the body, shapes personhood and produces crucial knowledge. The knowledge that bears a powerful meaning is communicated on an internal but also external level. For Lea, it was not only vital that her son should know that he is the ‘same’ as his father and other Jewish men; but she also cared very much about the external knowledge – the people who “always know.” The decision to have one’s son circumcised thus highlights a desire for acceptance and recognition, as well as the distinction parental choices induce.

The external or ‘Jewish public’ knowledge of one’s bris plays a significant role in the social life of the Jewish community. During my fieldwork, people would often gossip about who was circumcised and who was not. As Lea pointed out, people in the community know who undergoes the ritual, and it is this knowledge that contributes to social recognition and acceptance of a new “rightful member of the community.” Young parents deciding about the bris understand the power of the ritual in their social context, as well as their religious context – given that halakhic descent, bris and age will ensure that a young man may be counted in a minyan.
Being present but not counted for the minyan, as a few men told me, foregrounds such distinctions, producing feelings of shame and inferiority. The distinction circumcision creates is thus not only between Jews and non-Jews, but also among Jews themselves – between those who have had a bris and those who have not.

Throughout my fieldwork, I often heard people making comments and gossiping about a group of adult men from the community who underwent their bris only after the political change in 1989. People sharing these stories with me and among themselves were mostly women who, though careful not to mention any names, drew attention to the fact that it was young men who were active with the SUJY and older men whose families declined to circumcise them during Socialism. According to the stories, during the 1990s, several young men got circumcised on a trip to Israel; and a group of others, both younger and older men, underwent their bris in Bratislava, having invited a mohel from abroad. “After the revolution, even adult men had their bris. They called a mohel and told him that it was not possible to get circumcised during Socialism,” Eleonora told me, with a tone of annoyance and disapproval in her voice. “I didn’t want to say anything then, because you know it doesn’t look good, but until this day I cannot understand how they could say it was not possible?!” Eleonora comes from a family where traditions are important. When her son was born in the late 1970s, they invited a mohel from Vienna to perform the bris in their flat. “My son was circumcised on the eighth day as the Jewish laws dictate, and I did not see any problem doing it, even at that time.” As she recalled, “When I went to see a doctor, everyone knew I was a židovka (a ‘Jewess’). They had a look and asked ‘Was it for ritual reasons?’, and I replied, ‘Yes, for ritual.’ And that was all. It was possible.” Eleonora and her family, however, had lived in a small town in Western Slovakia; living a Jewish life that was visible outside of the home – as a bris would make it – was not something people in bigger cities felt comfortable doing. The constant presence and surveillance of the ŠtB, among other things, contributed to limiting religious practice during Socialism, and a sudden rise in interest in circumcisions after 1989.

This discrepancy in people’s experiences of practicing religious traditions and customs between various regions and even families, of course, resulted in an environment of differentiation and distinction. The comments people made give rise
to the question of what makes a man Jewish. “I know several adult men who underwent bris – they did it because if a man is not circumcised, he can’t be counted in a minyan, and actually he is not a Jew. Some people may say ‘I am a Jew’, but who gave them the right to change the law?,” reflected Eleonora. For Jews who come from traditionally-oriented or practicing families, like Eleonora, a bris has more than just a symbolic power. It creates Jewish male personhood, and produces new degrees of social inclusion, status and recognition within the community – something that many adult men who decided to undergo their bris after the political revolution in 1989 sought. 62

Aware of these community politics and the tensions they created, many young Jews from practicing families found the issue of circumcising their sons to be an “automatic sure thing.” Silvia and her husband were certain from the beginning that if they had a son, he would be circumcised. When the time came, however, the bris had to be postponed. Their son was born prematurely, and was too weak for the circumcision to take place on the eighth day after his birth. Eleonora, Silvia’s mother, reflected proudly, “I didn’t even need to push them to do it – they said themselves that we just need to wait a little bit and once the boy is stronger it will be done. And the rabbi was okay with it too.”

Young Jews who ‘marry out’ also see the bris as an important rite, and several couples I knew in exogamous unions chose to circumcise their sons. Rachel came from a prominent Bratislava Jewish family, and despite marrying outside of the community – which surprised many – she decided to bring her children up as Jewish, “as it should be.” Supported by her family, she made clear to her husband that a bris was crucial. When he agreed, the ritual satisfied her parents and contributed to the community’s acceptance of her union by proving her intent to raise her family to be Jewish.

When talking about circumcisions, some young Jews – like Rachel – tended to rationalise their choices for others, and partially also themselves, describing their motivations for having their sons circumcised with reference to the various health

62 After my fieldwork, 70-year-old Adam decided to undergo his bris in Vienna. While active within the community for several years, respected for his knowledge, he could not have participated in prayers to the extent he wanted. Undergoing this ritual and receiving his Jewish middle name that his father had picked for him before he was killed in the Shoah, Adam feels his parents would be proud that finally “all was in order.”
benefits it carries. “Tradition is one thing, but circumcision is actually also beneficial for health. There were various studies conducted on that,” Rachel explained.

While the decision to hold a bris was more common among exogamously-wed Jewish women than men, there was also one exception that many people talked about.63 Anton, coming from an endogamous Jewish family, found love outside of the community. Although many assumed he would distance himself from Jewish life, he agreed with his wife to raise their children to be Jewish, and sealed this decision by having their son circumcised. For many people in the community, this act represented a sign that their intentions were serious. Several times, I heard a comment: “The little one is not halakhic, but he is circumcised!”

When we look at bris and the role it plays in this small community, it is important to keep in mind that, as Lea said, “people do know”, and they talk about it. Not only does the ritual create a Jewish body or shape a man’s personhood, deciding upon a bris serves as a powerful means of demonstrating one’s intent to raise one’s child as a Jew. Whether in endogamous or exogamous unions, the bris has the power to convey this message to the ‘Jewish public’. More than just an initiation, then, this ritual brings about a much-desired acceptance and recognition for young Jewish parents and their offspring, proving the seriousness of their intentions, and their identification with Jewishness.

The uncircumcised body: Delegating choice

Among young Jews, there were also those who did not or could not circumcise their sons, as well as those who did not want to. These people, mostly in exogamous unions, often articulated their reasons in terms of health, fear, ethics and individual choice.

---

63 Contrary to Dencik’s (2009) findings, where he shows that statistically the ritual of circumcision among exogamous couples in Sweden, Finland and Norway depended on the fact of whether the father was circumcised, in out-marriages in the Slovak context, the practice of circumcision is more prevalent when the children are Jewish according to the Halakhah. The reason is often associated with the sense of responsibility young Jewish women feel towards their families, the community, and also their ancestors.
Dagmar, who had a halakhic background, was expected to agree to a *bris* despite her intermarriage. When her son was born, Rabbi Myers approached her grandmother asking whether he should schedule the ritual. “Luckily, granny somehow bluffed her way out of answering him. She thought of some reasons why we didn’t want the *bris* yet.” Feeling ashamed and guilty for causing a possible disappointment, Dagmar admitted she was grateful not to deal with his question personally. “My son was born prematurely, had jaundice, and didn’t want to drink milk properly,” she explained. Experiencing these complications and imagining the *bris* procedure, she said, “I just felt sorry for him, and I didn’t want my little boy to go through something like that.” She and her non-Jewish husband agreed that they would leave the question of circumcision for their son to decide when he was older.

Framing their concerns in terms of health issues and leaving the choice to their sons was a way some young Jews negotiated their own feelings of insecurity about whether they would like their sons to be circumcised at all. For many people, especially those who intermarried, granting the choice to the person they believed it most concerned – their sons – represented a means by which they could delay their own decision-making, postponing a choice that might produce conflict or disappointment. The decision itself, in this sense, affects not only the new-born boy, but also his parents and their relations with their families and the community.

When I met Tana, she was already in the last trimester of her pregnancy. Having been raised as atheist, and not having known about her father’s Jewish descent until her early adulthood, she had begun to explore her family’s roots, Jewish culture and her own Jewishness only during the last several years. Although she had married a non-Jewish man, she tried to implement some “light Jewish features” – such as displaying a menorah at home or cooking some Jewish meals – in their marital life. “If I cared about it, I think my husband would not say a word if I wanted to celebrate *Hanukah* or *Purim*,” she said. When it came to the upbringing of children, however, she demurred: “I guess with a circumcision it would already be a bit too sensitive – it would be too much.” She was not even considering a *bris* for her son.

While Tana, anticipating the uneasiness that a *bris* might cause between herself and her husband, decided not to bring it up with him at all, many young Jews
saw discussion about the potential upbringing of their children as an important aspect of choosing their life partners (as we saw in Chapter Four). This issue is especially important for Jewish women whose children, according to the *Halakhah*, will be Jewish even when marrying out. Explaining that one wants to bring children up as Jewish and getting a reassurance that the chosen partner would enable one to do so is, thus, by many, considered crucial. Observing the choices of several young Jews, I noticed that the extent to which this conversation developed could affect conflicts later on, when an abstract discussion about an uncertain future changed to the need for a decision in the present.

During my fieldwork, I often heard women talking about needing an assurance from potential partners that they would be able to bring their children up Jewish. What I found interesting was the degree to which this was communicated – “You need to hear him say ‘Yes, I am okay with you raising our children Jewish’. Whether *bris* or no *bris*, we can discuss that when it’s actually happening.” Substantial space was left for misinterpretation and renegotiation, leading to many conflicts.

Coming from a family with a strong Jewish awareness, Jarmila was certain that she wanted to bring her children up to be Jewish. If she had a boy, she saw the *bris* and *bar mitzvah* as a matter of course. She fell in love and married a non-Jewish man. “I didn’t see a problem in marrying him, but after the wedding I realised it would have been much easier if I had married someone Jewish,” she said. One of the main conflicts they experienced in their marital life came with the birth of their son and the question of a *bris*. “I was extremely disappointed that my son was not circumcised, but my husband didn’t even want to hear about it. He said it wasn’t a good thing – that it won’t do any good.” With anger in her voice, she explained, “He was shocked I had even considered it, and I was stunned he didn’t think of it. He said we hadn’t discussed it before the wedding. It may be true but, for God’s sake, he lived for several years in Israel!” This issue resulted in a conflict, leaving them both shocked and uncertain about what the future would bring. Reflecting on the issue later, Jarmila asserted, “If I had a Jewish husband, I would have had my son circumcised for sure.” Admitting her Jewishness often produced friction and disputes, she was resigned to hoping that her husband would agree with their son.
having a *bar mitzvah*. Although her son was almost twelve years old at the time of my fieldwork, and she knew there was a period of studying with the rabbi before the *bar mitzvah* ceremony, she was leaving the issue “to be discussed at an appropriate time,” avoiding conflicts until absolutely necessary. Returning to the question of choice, she said, “We will see what he says as well. I would like him to have a *bar mitzvah* very much, but not to an extent that I would force him into it, as I was forced to study playing the violin. In the end, it is his life and this era is different – it’s also up to him.”

Many Jewish women who married outside of the Jewish community sought the reassurance of being able to raise their children as Jewish – but they tended not to discuss the particular practices such an upbringing would entail (such as circumcision or a *bar mitzvah*) until the time came for a decision to be made. Parenting problems between intermarried couples often emerged early, when a decision about the *bris* needed to be made. The character of this rite, which leaves a permanent mark on the body, often proves problematic to non-Jewish partners. While the endogamous couples mentioned earlier saw the *bris* as a means to create ‘sameness’ and gain social acceptance and recognition, many exogamous couples were wary of the power of this procedure to make their children ‘different’. Circumcision irrevocably separated sons of Jewish mothers from their non-Jewish fathers (and classmates or friends), through a bodily mark bearing a powerful symbolic message. It is this irreversible act that many young Jews, especially those who married out, approached with caution.

Several people remarked how a *bris* actually betrayed Jewish men during the Second World War – when allegedly soldiers would lower their suspects’ trousers to see whether they were circumcised, or not, thereby proving their Jewishness. Circumcision was a more stable, and therefore more dangerous, sign of Jewishness than the yellow badge of the Star of David.64 And some young Jews – in view of the present political situation and their sense of insecurity – felt such risks were worth considering. The ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ created by circumcision made the parental decisions of inter-faith couples harder, raising political as well as ethical concerns, and often resulted in delegating the choice to children themselves.

64 See Kovács and Vajda (2003) for similar stories in a Hungarian context.
A few young Jews, such as Alena, explained the delaying and delegation of such decisions by arguing that “A bris is not so important for me, because it does not ensure the child’s identification with Jewishness. Moreover, it can be done at any time he wants. I would like my son to have a bar mitzvah though.” The body, in Alena’s account, is only a part of what makes a person Jewish, and the role of Jewish education is stressed – both at home as well as in preparing for a bar mitzvah, which entrusts an individual with another sort of knowledge.

‘Raising them as Jewish’: Education and providing ‘Jewish knowledge’

Young Jews share several ideals in terms of the values and morals with which they want to raise their children. They prioritise bringing their children up as conscientious, ethically acting, tolerant people, who enjoy sport, art, and ‘culture’, speak several languages, enjoy travelling, and value friendship and family.65 These values have been transmitted across generations, and play an important role in young Jews’ lives, serving as standards for, and marks of, their accomplishment. In this sense, they constitute a part of Jewish heritage that young parents want to inculcate in their children (see Bourdieu 1984). Apart from this, many also want to incorporate Jewish education into their child’s life. Their motivations span from a desire for their children “to know where they come from and where they belong,” to “getting at least some basic knowledge, so they won’t discover they are Jewish when they are ten years old and someone at school calls them, insultingly, a Jew”; and they reflect how difficult it had been for today’s young Jews to learn about their own Jewishness by uncovering a family secret (as discussed in Chapter One).

Among the first things young parents consider is the kind of kindergarten in which they will enrol their child. Young Jews in Bratislava can choose between three options. In 1995, Rabbi Myers and his wife established a private Jewish kindergarten

65 These values are class-bound, but I am not referring to them by the term ‘bourgeois’ for reasons associating this term with anti-Jewish persecutions during Socialism (discussed in the Introduction).
called *Lauder Gan Menachem* – colloquially known as the ‘Chabad kindergarten’. It is led by the rabbi’s wife, Chanie, and open to halakhically Jewish children from 2½ to 6 years of age. The second option is a private kindergarten called NEMO, which is situated in the building of the JCC and is open to both Jewish and non-Jewish children (from the age of 1½ years), and which provides classes in Judaism twice a week to a small group of Jewish children. Finally, the third option represents a selection of secular public or private kindergartens.

In choosing among these kindergartens, and making other choices for their children’s upbringing, young Jewish parents were especially concerned about being able to pass on critical knowledge about Judaism. “I think I can give my girls the Jewish upbringing I want them to have. I know how to prepare a Jewish programme for children and teach them all that is important,” Barbora affirmed one day, when we were talking about these concerns. Having been brought up with Jewish traditions herself, Barbora was confident she could give her daughters all the ‘Jewish knowledge’ they needed. Despite having a non-Jewish husband, the family’s life was oriented around the Jewish calendar, and they celebrated all the main Jewish holidays. While they were considering a Jewish kindergarten, Barbora was disenchanted with the distinctions the Chabad kindergarten made. “I do not like that separation. Why are children with only a father Jewish refused knowledge? Just because my children coincidently are eligible for their kindergarten, should I act like everything is fine? That would be very hypocritical. Imagine if it was the other way around.” Underscoring the ethics behind her choice, she added, “This is the reason I gave to Chanie as to why my children will not attend her kindergarten.” As for the NEMO kindergarten, Barbora and her husband concluded that they could teach their daughters Jewish traditions at home, and decided to prioritise what they called the ‘comfort’ of their children. “We agreed that we don’t want to travel every morning for 45 minutes to drive our kids to a kindergarten and then 45 minutes in the afternoon to get them home. We just decided for a local public kindergarten we have around the corner.” Choosing a kindergarten close to home, for many parents, offered an opportunity to enhance their children’s comfort and spend more time with them.
But it was the opportunity to educate one’s children at home that was most closely linked to the ability to pass on knowledge. This is easier for young Jews who come from practicing Jewish families, like Barbora, and therefore have the necessary knowledge and can count on help and support from their older kin. For many, it was the presence of “strong grandparents” (a term used by young Jews who lacked such support) that enabled young couples to prioritise the practicalities of everyday life without compromising a good Jewish upbringing. For others, however, a kindergarten represented one of the very few opportunities – if not the only one – to ensure some Jewish education for their children. Among young Jews who came from less observant backgrounds, it was a means of raising their children židovskejšie or ‘more Jewish’ than they were themselves, and “to have a more Jewish family.”

“While Silvia is certain she is giving her son enough ‘Jewish influence’ at home and when they attend community events, she also has strong grandparents and a Jewish partner to count on,” Stela reflected, contrasting Silvia’s situation with her case. “I have a non-Jewish partner, at home we don’t practice much, my father doesn’t identify with his Jewishness... I want my future children to attend a Jewish kindergarten. Every extra grain of Jewishness counts.” Stela, who came from a mixed secular background and had started to discover her Jewishness only several years before, felt she did not have enough knowledge to pass on to her children, nor many means to create a Jewish household on her own. For her, as for many other Jews in similar situations, the opportunity to enrol her children in a Jewish kindergarten was invaluable.

However, problems often arose with the eligibility criteria of particular kindergartens. While NEMO welcomed children – both halakhic and non-halakhic – with the only condition being the official membership of one parent in the JRC, the Chabad kindergarten drew its criterion around the definition of Jewishness according to the Halakhah.66 Although during the time of my fieldwork, the Chabad kindergarten was closed because it had so few children – many parents addressed this positively, saying, “at least there is no immediate distinction or separation” – choosing a kindergarten before represented a means for some parents to make a statement and prove their allegiance. As illustrated in Barbora’s story, disagreeing

---

66 During my fieldwork, there were nine Jewish children attending the NEMO kindergarten. According to their Jewish teacher, five of them were of halakhic descent.
with the admission politics of the Chabad kindergarten could result in confrontation and opting for a public kindergarten instead. Some Jews, though eligible for their children to attend the Chabad kindergarten, would similarly choose another option – whether NEMO or a secular variant. On the other hand, there are also couples for whom it was important that their children should have the “proper Jewish education” the Chabad kindergarten offered.

Dagmar, who came from an endogamous Bratislava family, was committed to enrolling her son in the kindergarten led by Chanie. Apart from a “good Jewish education,” this option offered other advantages, such as learning three languages at once – Slovak, English and Hebrew – with native speakers, and more individual care thanks to a low teacher-student ratio. “I was always sure I would like my children to attend her kindergarten. It even has state accreditation, so it follows the state educational programme, and they teach all a first grader needs to know. NEMO doesn’t have that, though they also try to follow the plan.” When her son was few months old, she decided to visit the Chabad kindergarten during the Open Doors Day. To her surprise, she did not like it as much as she had expected. “I didn’t mind the Orthodox orientation, it was my husband who was not happy about this whole idea,” she said. But when she saw little boys in the kindergarten wearing a kippah and tšitzí, she began to feel it was “too much – especially as we have a boy!” Dagmar and her husband were told a story of the young boys being stopped by passers-by who asked them about their kippot, saying, “what is that on your head?” The boys simply explained “čo sú zač” (what they are) – which was enough for Dagmar and her non-Jewish husband to change their minds. “That is exactly what we did not want, for him to openly show his Jewishness. For us, it’s a thing that we keep inside and learn about or share only within the sphere of the family and the community.”

When she was telling me this story, the phrasing Dagmar used to describe the interaction and the young boys’ uncovering “čo sú zač” highlighted a deeply embedded expectation that Jewishness could be perceived as negative and possibly stimulate antisemitism. “It is better not to provoke. We were and still are afraid of antisemitic reactions from the surroundings,” Dagmar explained.
When the time came, Dagmar and her husband decided to enrol their son in the NEMO kindergarten. “Luckily, just then the Chabad kindergarten was not opening for the year. I didn’t want to disappoint or offend Chanie, as she was always expecting my children to go there, since I am halakhic myself from both parents,” Dagmar explained. “Life created a situation when it was not necessary to explain why not,” she added, relieved. Though the Chabad kindergarten reopened thereafter, Dagmar was able to contend that her son was already used to NEMO.

Every year, the JRC reserves ten spaces in NEMO for children from the community. “At first we were afraid whether we would be accepted. You need to book your place well in advance,” Dagmar said. “It is not a purely Jewish kindergarten – it is mixed. There are ten spaces for us and around 20 children from outside.” Jewish education at NEMO involves two 45-minute-long classes a week, when Jewish children are taken aside and taught about Judaism and Jewish traditions. “For us, the Judaism they have at NEMO is enough. They have classes twice a week in the morning between 8:30 and 9:15,” Dagmar explained. She admitted, “We usually come late, around 9:00 – but what sticks to him during those 15–20 minutes is more than enough.” This comment highlighted that what mattered was not the amount of Jewish education her son would acquire, but rather the fact that he went to a kindergarten with other Jewish children, making her devotion and efforts to transmit Jewishness visible to the ‘Jewish public’.

When deciding which kindergarten to choose, Dagmar’s non-Jewish husband feared their son would learn Jewish songs or poems, and then face antisemitic discrimination or physical assaults if he shared them with non-Jewish children. While Dagmar thought this worry was exaggerated and unrealistic at such an early age, she admitted they had come to face this problem. “My mother took him to the playground the other day and she came back saying he was singing the song David Melech Yisrael to some girl, and she was just watching him, stunned.” Interpreting this as something that should never happen, Dagmar and her husband decided to teach their son about the boundaries between home and the unpredictable outside. “We had to explain to him that there are things he can do only at home or the kindergarten, but not outside. He now sings two songs that he learned at his Judaism class, and I told him that ‘You can only sing these at home or at your granny’s. Not
outside!’’ Leaning in, she continued, ‘‘Even if we are leaving the flat and he is singing a Jewish song, I tell him: ‘Okay, now we are already going outside. Do not sing this anymore – now you can sing something else. Sing an English song’.’’ When I asked whether he understands this separation, Dagmar nodded, saying, ‘‘He does behave now,’’ and added, ‘‘You see, what my husband feared became true, but luckily, at this age children are still quite tolerant.’’

Choosing a kindergarten for young Slovak Jews in Bratislava represents an important step. Apart from the opportunity for their children to be introduced to Judaism early on in their lives, often providing them with knowledge that their parents would not be able to supply, the choice young Jews make conveys a powerful message. This one decision – whether to enrol one’s child in the Chabad, or NEMO, or a secular kindergarten – turns into a statement to people within the community, and a proof of allegiance that creates a sense of communal recognition or acknowledgement. While for Barbora, it was important to make her dislike of the distinction created by the Chabad kindergarten clear, Dagmar was grateful that when she needed to make this choice the only ‘‘Jewish option’’ was NEMO. As people within the community talked about the choices young parents made concerning the kindergartens, these decisions affect not only the education of children, but also the status of parents, and often, by extension, of grandparents as well.

While it is important for young Jews to have their children learn about their Jewishness and Jewish traditions early, for many it is crucial that this knowledge should be hidden from the sight of the ‘‘non-Jewish world’’. From Dagmar’s story, we can see that there is a strong emphasis on the boundary between the safe space of home, the ‘‘Jewish public’’ – where a demonstration of one’s Jewishness and efforts to bring one’s children up as Jewish is crucial – and the uncertain space of the wider public. Like Dagmar, many young Jewish parents taught their children to navigate Jewishness in their everyday lives through the practice of compartmentalisation – as they do themselves, by donning or taking off ‘‘tradition’’ and signs of Jewishness at appropriate times. The awareness of a separation between ‘‘safe’’ and uncertain spaces is an important lesson from the past that resonates among Jewish families to this day. The strategy of ‘‘careful concealment’’ that affected how young Jews were raised also
permeates their choices and practices in bringing up the next generation. Despite a desire to raise their children to be ‘more Jewish’, parents such as Dagmar consider 15-20 minutes of Jewish classes to be “more than enough.” What does this say about how much (and what) they want their children to learn? Is ‘Jewish knowledge’ something to be implemented in everyday life? Or is its acquisition more of a symbolic gesture to be witnessed only within the ‘Jewish public’? Following this separation of space in terms of audience, (in)security and knowledge, what happens within the space of home?

Confusion and Jewishness at home

During my fieldwork, many young Jews talked about the confusion that enrolment in the Chabad or NEMO kindergartens might cause their children, and often used that concern to justify their choices. “NEMO is not really a Jewish kindergarten. They even prepare a Christmas programme,” Lea explained, emphasising that she wanted her son to attend a kindergarten where he could learn more about Judaism and Jewish traditions. Like many young Jewish parents, she had a strong opinion about which kindergarten she would choose:

I don’t want him to go to NEMO where it is all split – as if torn between two worlds. It would be harder to explain to him such ambivalence. They separate children for the Jewish class and then they put them together for colouring a Christmas tree. It just creates a mess.

According to Lea, it would be “easier to explain to him, ‘You attend the Jewish kindergarten at Chanie’s and we do not practice this stuff the same way at home, but this is how some people do it’.”

While Lea, like many others, did not see a problem with inconsistencies enrolment at Chanie’s kindergarten would create, many people had the exact opposite opinion. “Imagine your child goes to a kindergarten where he needs to wash his hands and pray before and after every meal, where they are taught about all

---

67 The NEMO kindergarten does not officially state that it offers Jewish classes, nor that it has any association with the Jewish community. Their online profile, however, says they do prepare Christmas, Easter and Halloween programmes with enrolled children.
rituals and Jewish holidays – which then at home are not practiced at all, or only in a very light form,” Stela argued. “Can you see what this might do to a small child? The message is not clear then. Is he going to think that his Jewishness is bound to or limited only to the space of kindergarten?”

The concern of many young Jewish parents over their children’s potential confusions about contrasts between kindergarten teachings and their Jewish family life sheds light on their desire to make their children ‘more Jewish’. Situating their efforts to raise the next generation of Slovak Jews in a visible space within the ‘Jewish public’ – by selecting a Jewish kindergarten and taking part in the community events – enables these young parents to gain recognition. But in the discontinuities between what they want their children to learn and then make ‘invisible’ in their everyday life, a question emerges: what is the role of Jewishness when no one is looking?

The choices and decisions young Jews make when bringing up their children constitute a spectrum, ranging from raising them without any Jewish traditions, to orienting their lives according to the Jewish calendar. Tana, who was not raised in Jewish traditions herself, did not want to “force any Jewish lifestyle” on her children. But what was important for her was to tell them about their family history. “I would like them to know who Jews are, and that we have some Jewish roots in the family. At a certain age, I think, it is significant that they know also about the dark side of history and the effects of the Holocaust.” In her flat, a menorah stands right next to a statue of the Buddha – an artefact symbolising another part of her life, neither more nor less important. While a hanukiah sits right next to a Christmas tree at Dorota and Samuel’s house, they know Jewishness will have a central role in their children’s lives. Being brought up on the boundary between the Jewish and Christian ‘worlds’, having both traditions and choosing aspects they like from each is important. “We want to bring our children up as Jewish – but with both the lovely smell of a Christmas tree and the chatter of the synagogue. Just as we were. With the same values and stories.” On the other side of town, however, not even the shadow of a Christmas tree can be found, though the lights of a hanukiah standing next to several beautiful menorot passed down through generations burn bright. From Jewish cookbooks in the kitchen to stickers representing the Hebrew alphabet in the
children’s room, Barbora has created a space where her daughters are taught about Jewish traditions every day. “I am already introducing them to Jewishness. We light the candles every Friday, go to shul on Rosh Hashanah, and spend Yom Kippur and have a Seder at my parents. When my older daughter sees a laid table with a white cloth, she screams, ‘It is a Seder’.”

Most young Jewish parents, however, are somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. While wanting their children to have a Jewish education, and to learn more than they themselves had learned, they might choose the Chabad or NEMO kindergarten, but not practice or teach the children at home.

Though she enrolled her son in the NEMO kindergarten to learn about Judaism, Dagmar admitted they do not incorporate this knowledge into their everyday life at home. “We didn’t have time to light the candles during Hanukah – it just went so fast. I am ashamed to confess this, but maybe with time we will do more. You see I have a hanukiah and also Shabbat candlesticks there,” she said, pointing to the vitrine with her wedding gifts. Owning some artefacts of Jewish material culture was often presented as if having them on display was already a step closer to practising Jewish traditions. In a sense, it was, since for many, making their Jewishness visible even within their homes was more than their parents did during Socialism.

While many parents considered gaining ‘Jewish knowledge’ in kindergartens important, the possibility of enrolling their offspring in a Jewish primary school led by Chanie Myers was not met with much enthusiasm. Chanie had the state accreditation necessary to open a Jewish primary school, but despite approaching young parents with this option, it had not yet materialised. “My children are always the only ones on the list,” Ivana complained. “She only needs five children to open a class, and even if five children are just finishing her kindergarten, none of these parents are interested in Jewish school.” There is a limit, in other words, to the level of Jewish education parents want for their children, and a balance to be struck with learning how to fit and blend in with the majority environment.

Despite finding a Jewish primary school unnecessary, many young Jews sought other sources of knowledge, and places where their children could socialise among their peers and learn about Jewishness within the space of the community.
Jarmila’s children went to the Chabad kindergarten, but did not practice any traditions at home. Explaining her ‘passivity’, Jarmila argued that with her children getting older, she tried to create a Jewish programme outside of the house. “While *cheder* is not very appealing as only two boys attend it, and my children said they didn’t want to go, for now they go to the Moadon camps.” Organised by the CUJRC, these camps are a popular choice, attracting around thirty children on average. Welcoming Jewish children between the ages of six to fourteen, the Moadon camps take place four times a year – in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. They create a ‘safe space’ outside of the home, where children from various backgrounds and towns all over Slovakia meet. Moreover, these are also spaces where children are taught how to cope with the possible ‘confusion’ that their parents’ choices might cause.

During the winter camp, towards the end of my fieldwork, the camp leader prepared a programme incorporating a marionette play about a small girl named Judita who had to face her parents hiding the fact they were Jewish. The play portrayed them sending her to a Jewish school, but strictly refusing when she wanted to light candles on *Hanukah*. Reflecting the reality of parents’ desires to educate their children, but highlighting their persistent fear and passivity, the play showed children how to cope with such situations.

**Striving towards a ‘more positive Jewishness’**

Among the practices and choices young Jewish parents faced when raising their children, a small but committed movement towards a “more positive Jewishness” was clear. This phrase was used by several young people who belonged to a group active within the SUJY in the late 1990s, and who continued to engage actively in Jewish community life thereafter. These young parents saw their own upbringing as a form of Jewishness oriented towards the negative past of the Holocaust and Socialist persecution – something private and better kept secret, an identity bearing otherness, shame, and insecurity (see Chapter Three). Having engaged with Rabbi Myers and his family upon their arrival in 1993, this group of people saw that living a Jewish
life can take a different form. These young parents wanted to create an environment for their children where they could grow up with a more positive experience of Jewishness.

When I went to visit Lea for the first time, as I recounted in Chapter Three, I was astonished by the display of a mezuzah on the doorframe of her home. When I pointed out its uniqueness in the region, Lea immediately explained, “We did it for our son, as we want him to grow up in a home where we do not hide our Jewishness. You see, we even have it outside, as it should be.” Lea and Teodor wanted to raise their son not only in a knowledge of Jewish traditions, but to take a pride in them:

We want for him what neither of us had, to instil pride. When we meet ‘among our people’ we are all proud to be Jewish and we enjoy it, but outside everyone lives an anonymous life in front of others.

For many young parents, making Jewishness invisible was a crucial part of their own upbringing – an endeavour undertaken by their families over decades. Teodor himself had always considered his Jewishness a “handicap.” Growing up, he felt “different,” like he “neither belonged in Slovakia nor [was] welcomed by the majority.” Noting that the “word žid [Slovak for ‘Jew’] is a common swearword,” Teodor explained that he found it better to hide his Jewishness in the non-Jewish public. But with the birth of his first child, he decided that he did not want his son to experience this constant fear of “what if someone finds out”. Although “the fear is always prevalent,” Lea and Teodor wanted to make their son proud of his Jewishness without worrying about someone discovering it. “We would like him to be openly proud of who he is without any fear,” Lea said. Knowing that they would need to overcome their own fears first, they tried to make small steps – including displaying the mezuzah. Although Teodor later told me he worried about the safety of his family, and the mezuzah presented a dilemma, they decided to do it for the sake of their son. “We agreed that the best way to raise him is to teach him pride and krav maga,” Teodor remarked, jokingly. 68

The way Lea and Teodor want to bring their son up to be proud of his Jewishness, and the ways they articulate and implement their plans, underline the

68 Krav maga is a self-defence martial art. It was developed by Imre (Imi) Lichtenfeld in Bratislava for guarding the Jewish quarter in the 1930s and 1940s (Presner 2007: xix).
internal struggle most young Jews face. While acknowledging the fear and carefulness with which they were brought up, which shaped their own perceptions of Jewishness, some young parents tried to transform such negative associations into feelings of pride for their children. This move towards a “more positive Jewishness” was not, however, pursued by incorporating more Jewish traditions into their homes, or by becoming more active within the community. Young Jews felt that the necessary change should happen in matters of visibility – and that involved learning to feel comfortable with one’s Jewishness in non-Jewish spaces. Many of their older kin disapproved, and tried to remind them of the necessity for caution. While Lea and Teodor felt they were making a step forward, but also risking their security, they knew that many non-Jewish people did not know what a mezuzah was. Moreover, living in a three-flat house with only two other neighbours they saw as “nice and tolerant”, they felt that displaying a mezuzah was a small step made in a space which could be controlled, to some extent, as safe.

Without making their Jewishness visible, there were other young parents who found ways of encouraging more positive Jewishness in their children by not mentioning the Holocaust and other ‘darker sides’ of the past. For many young Jews, the reality of post-war scars had been an unavoidable part of their everyday lives. Some have decided to silence the connections between their Jewishness and the Shoah until their children reach a certain age, so as to allow their children to form their understanding of Jewishness around its more pleasant elements. “I do not want my children to associate who they are with the Shoah and their ancestors being murdered. It is not a good way to be,” Jarmila asserted. She tried to shelter her children from the negative past, but everything changed when they came home from the Szarvas summer camp asking about the Holocaust. 69 “They feel they are different and maybe we should not push them to be ‘normal’.” Noting that the effort to hide the past can do more damage than good, Jarmila described her son returning from a day trip with the rabbi’s wife very upset and not wanting to go again. “On the way home, in a public city bus, Chanie made them clap their hands and scream, ‘We are Jews and we are proud of it.’ You can imagine how he must have felt on the 83 bus wearing a kippah and saying this.”

69 Szarvas summer camp is an international camp established in the 1990s for Jewish children in Hungary.
Despite a desire to create a more positive Jewishness for their children, then, young Jewish parents continue to treat their Jewishness as a private matter, better kept away from non-Jewish spaces; and as such, they transmit not only Jewishness, but also the strategy of ‘careful concealment’.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown what criteria young Jews in Bratislava consider when making choices and decisions in bringing up their children. These include choosing a name, considering a circumcision, and deciding what influences young parents want to incorporate into their children’s upbringing – in the form of kindergartens, Jewish camps, or a selection of traditions at home. I have highlighted how issues of (in)visibility, fear, choice, ethics, knowledge and recognition come to play crucial roles in this process.

This chapter demonstrates a desire among young Jews to move towards a ‘more positive Jewishness’ of their children, while simultaneously shedding light on the tensions that arise from their efforts to negotiate their own Jewishness and new roles as parents in an insecure environment. Young Jews, having been brought up themselves to keep their Jewishness private, face a dilemma: on the one hand, they want to make their children ‘more Jewish’ than they are, and to instil pride in them; but at the same time, they sometimes unconsciously project their own fears and need for carefulness into their children’s upbringing. Often, they consciously teach their children to compartmentalise as a way of navigating their everyday Jewishness in a non-Jewish society. In this sense, intergenerational transmission goes well beyond the reproduction of Jewishness, to the transmission of values they were brought up with, associated with social class and cultural orientation (see Bourdieu 1984; Bahloul 1992), but also with a sense of insecurity and the need for ‘careful concealment’.

I have argued that young Jewish parents, who associate their own Jewishness with feelings of otherness, shame and insecurity, are trying to communicate a
message of their devotion by raising their children Jewish. From choosing names with a Hebrew origin, through circumcising their sons, to enrolling their children in Jewish kindergartens and ensuring they learn the necessary ‘Jewish knowledge’, young Jews are undertaking performative acts that declare identification with and belonging in the Jewish community. I have shown that these choices convey a powerful message of allegiance, and, in creating distinctions, that they affect not only the status of the child, but also that of the parents and their families. While these declarations are meant to be visible within the ‘Jewish public’, however, young Jews work to conceal them outside of that ‘safe space’.

It is the tension between seeking visibility and recognition for their actions, and guarding their invisibility as markers of ‘Jewish difference’ that young Jews struggle to negotiate. This struggle results in the creation of two audiences or ‘publics’, differentiated by knowledge, which enables young parents to communicate differential messages that both reveal and conceal Jewishness. In this sense, invisibility plays as constitutive a role in the identification of young Slovak Jews as visibility does. Performing visibility and invisibility to chosen audiences, through stretching and shrinking the ‘public’ and ‘private’, young Jews try to balance their desire for belonging with the risks of otherness. The socio-cultural reproduction of Jewishness through raising Jewish children demonstrates both what young Jews consider to be crucial elements of Jewish personhood, and also crucial means of negotiating their own Jewishness in the light of insecurities of the past, present, and imagined future.
Conclusion

In January 2016, while spending time with my family in Slovakia, I decided to travel to Bratislava for the day to visit Milena – a Holocaust survivor who had become a friend of mine in the course of my fieldwork. I visited Milena every time I returned to Slovakia, and this time, I wanted to ask her for advice. I was trying to learn more about how antisemitic behaviour was addressed and recorded by the police, when it was reported; and I had faced multiple refusals to discuss the issue from police officials in my hometown. When I called to let her know I was coming, I asked Milena whether she knew of any way to get such information. “Oh, of course, my dear,” she responded. “I have a friend whose husband is a policeman, I’ll ask him. And you need to talk to the rabbi. He was attacked several times,” she replied.

When I arrived in Bratislava and met Milena, she said, “We’re going for lunch at the community centre. The rabbi remembered you and your research, and was very eager to help more. So I invited him for lunch.” Arriving at the JCC, I noticed the door had been cleaned of the graffiti I had seen there during my last visit – a scrawled insistence that “nechceme multikulturalizmus” (we do not want multiculturalism). We rang the bell and were let in through the main door, which led on to a corridor which had undergone major renovation since my fieldwork – clearly designed to improve the building’s security, and to make it easier to monitor people coming in and out. We found ourselves standing in front of a glass wall and another door, at which the doorkeeper greeted us and let us in; and then we walked over to the community canteen. The rabbi joined us shortly after for a pleasant conversation, and shared with us the stories of several encounters he had had with the police. What I found most interesting, however, was something that happened after we had said our goodbyes and were preparing to leave.

The rabbi came back into the canteen and rejoined us, leaning towards me confidentially. While our previous conversation had been in Slovak so that Milena would also understand, with a few passages in slower English when the rabbi could not find the right Slovak words, this time he looked straight into my eyes and spoke more quietly and quickly in English, with a strong American accent. He seemed
deliberately to be making it difficult for anyone around us to understand what he was saying.

“You’ll understand maybe better what I’m about to ask you because you are not Jewish,” he said, and I wondered what he was going to tell me. I nodded, to let him know that I was listening. “Are you still in contact with Oliver?” he asked. When I said I was, he asked, with concern in his voice, “Do you know whether he is angry at me? Or something?” Perplexed by his question, I told him I did not know anything; and so the rabbi explained what had happened.

Some time previously, Oliver had wanted to become a member of the board of the JRC. For his application to be considered, he was asked to supply proof of his Jewish descent. For purposes within the community, proof would usually mean the birth certificate of a grandparent, ideally the maternal grandmother, recording their Jewishness. As the rabbi explained, after this request had been made, Oliver “disappeared” and did not participate in community events anymore. “I haven’t seen him since then. I don’t know whether he’s offended for that and angry at me, but I had to ask him as the board required proof.” I could see that the rabbi was asking about Oliver because he cared about him. Oliver was not only a very active member of the JRC, and within the SUJY during my fieldwork, but he had brought the rabbi closer to the SUJY and to community life, encouraging him to undertake Wednesday Torah reading classes and inviting him to give lectures at various SUJY events. Oliver was a regular presence in the synagogue, counted in the minyan, and a frequent guest at dinners at the rabbi’s house. Oliver’s silence and ‘disappearance’ from community life, therefore, was of great concern to the rabbi, and raised many questions. And the rest of the community had noticed his disappearance, too.

“T’m worried he’s angry at me, but it’s also – you know – that people are talking,” the rabbi explained. As Oliver had not supplied proof of his Jewishness, community members were starting to be suspicious about whether he was Jewish at all. “This is bad,” the rabbi remarked. Watching his concerned face, I heard myself reply, “From what I know, Oliver is Jewish. His parents are Jewish and all his grandparents were affected by the Shoah – whether in hiding or in the camps.” He immediately asked, “Have you seen them?” I had to admit I had not met them. Oliver
has discouraged me from interviewing them, noting that they were very busy and preferred not to speak about the past.

I realised the rabbi’s concern about Oliver’s parents, as well as the concern of other community members, was a question of uncertainty and trust. It was the suddenly missing piece of knowledge about Oliver’s background that put his belonging in question. “Adam apparently knows every Jewish family in Bratislava, everyone in the community here,” the rabbi continued, “but he said he had never heard of that family, he never met them.” He paused. “It doesn’t mean anything yet,” he explained, trying to make his worries less visible and our conversation lighter, “but there are rumours, people say that they might not be Jews.” “Could you please ask him how he is?” the rabbi said, leaving with a sign of satisfaction when I promised I would.

Suddenly, I was confronted with the fragility of trust, and the uncertainty surrounding it, which this thesis discusses. What makes a person Jewish? And what serves as a good enough proof of such Jewishness? Whom can you trust?

This thesis has focused on three interlinked questions: the negotiation of Jewishness across shifting boundaries between the private and public; uncertainty and (mis)trust; and the politics of Jewishness in family and community life. It demonstrates how closely politics and kinship are intertwined, guiding people’s negotiations of Jewish identity and belonging, as well as their wider social relationships in contexts of insecurity and mistrust.

Tracing the complexity of social relations across the ruptures marked by the Shoah and the Velvet Revolution in 1989, this thesis also shows the significance of the ‘personal rupture’ prompted by learning about one’s Jewish descent. I have discussed these tensions and conflicts in terms of visibility, (mis)trust, and knowledge, and shed light on processes of ‘othering’ and creating ‘sameness’ – by discussing status, making and maintaining distinctions, and young Jews’ work towards acceptance and recognition.

Many young Jews in Slovakia learned about their Jewish roots only later in life, and once uncovered, this family secret created a rupture in the continuity of their life.
stories. This thesis began with an exploration of how young Slovak Jews were brought up, and why knowledge of their Jewishness came as a surprise to many. As Chapter One showed, the discovery of their Jewishness was always prompted by some external trigger. Most young Jews learned about their descent after the Velvet Revolution, when their parents felt the socio-political situation was more tolerant. Though this information was often presented as simply informative in character, I argued that it was in fact a sort of ‘constitutive knowledge’ (Strathern 1999). Acquiring this knowledge changed young Jews’ perceptions of themselves, and, by redefining the categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in view of their new perspectives on the past, also affected how they related to others. Learning about their Jewishness and their family histories during the Shoah made young Jews feel ‘othered’, and brought about a sense of ‘un-belonging’.

After their discovery, many tried to learn more about what it means to be Jewish, and approached organised Jewish life in Bratislava. Chapter Two explored how young Jews negotiate their Jewishness within ‘Jewish spaces’, and discussed their experiences of group boundaries and the role of knowledge in social acceptance. I demonstrated that where one comes from – in terms of one’s parents’ marital choices, one’s descent in view of the Halakhah, and one’s locality, as well as whether the family is known or ‘disappeared’ from Jewish communal life during Socialism – largely influences young Jews’ status within the community, creating distinctions of recognition that young Jews struggle to negotiate. By showing how choices made by older kin in times of political upheaval are now judged in terms of loyalty, betrayal, and (mis)trust, this chapter shed light on how ‘identity politics’ within the Jewish community have been saturated by politics at large.

Shifting to consider the risk of betrayal from non-Jewish others outside the community, Chapter Three examined the ways young Jews navigate their Jewishness, their belonging and their otherness, by creating an elastic public/private divide outside the ‘safe space’ of their homes and the Jewish community. Upon learning about their family’s Jewish roots, young Jews were taught to keep their Jewishness secret, and never to talk about it outside of ‘Jewish spaces’ or home. Emphasising the necessity for caution, their parents and grandparents transmitted not only family histories and values, but also fears and insecurities. This
intergenerational transmission of insecurity, in light of the ruptures and uncertainties created by both the Shoah and Socialism, influenced young Jews’ perceptions of the past, present, and future, and affected those of their relationships that crossed the boundaries of the Jewish community. Raised to be careful and suspicious of others, young Jews experienced an inner struggle when on the one hand they wanted to be proud of their Jewishness and incorporate Jewish traditions into their lives, yet at the same time they felt a need to keep it secret. This chapter explored the politics of Jewishness outside of ‘Jewish spaces’, while reflecting on issues of (mis)trust and visibility; and it showed the ways young Jews guard the markers of ‘otherness’ by employing strategies of ‘careful concealment’ and compartmentalisation.

Chapter Four turned to explore how young Jews’ experiences of Jewishness influence their preferences and practices in choosing life partners. I showed how young Jews balance various familial and communal pressures, as well as tensions arising between their desires for romantic love and attraction on one hand, but also ‘sameness’ and certain understanding in contexts of mistrust and insecurity on the other. While young Jews prefer to marry endogamously, I argued that their views of ‘endogamy’ are expansive and innovative. For many young Jews, Jewishness is revealed in the traces of memory, and endogamy is often defined in terms of ‘shared otherness’, based on being descendants of Shoah survivors and vicariously sharing that experience. This desire for sameness is motivated by a deeply felt need for understanding rooted in such a traumatic experience. By extending the limits of what counts as endogamy, they stretch group boundaries and create new levels of relatedness. At the same time, this preference for sameness – in terms of Jewishness, shared values, education, religious observance, or socio-economic background – stood at odds with young Jews’ desires for romantic love. Looking for a ‘spark’ frequently led them to seek exogamous unions, though these often exacerbated issues of (mis)trust, and required the renegotiation of young Jews’ fears.

Following the spousal choices young Jews made, Chapter Five explored their decisions around weddings within the politicised context of the Jewish community. The form of wedding ritual one chooses is a powerful means of demonstrating one’s devotion and allegiance, or a potential lack thereof. I showed that ideas about what makes a wedding Jewish have changed over generations, under the influence of
different political regimes, and argued that Jewish weddings today seek a visible return to an ‘unknown’ tradition, taking on forms not experienced by previous generations. The traditional elements of the chuppah wedding – though often negotiated and slightly adjusted – are seen as signs of authenticity, and together with the strict requirements of eligibility turn this ritual into a powerful proof of one’s devotion to Jewishness and the heritage of one’s ancestors. At the same time, this choice of ritual marks a clear distinction between young Jews marrying within the community, and those marrying out of it. As a ritual undertaken squarely within the ‘Jewish public’, involving the whole community as witnesses, it creates the desired social legitimisation and recognition. But the ritual of chuppah wedding also excludes other marriages of young Jews who are not ‘Jewish enough’ to fulfil the strict requirements for this rite, who married outside of the community, or who’s allegiance lies elsewhere.

Even after the wedding, young Jews – both those who married endogamously and those who married non-Jews – sought ways to demonstrate their continued belonging, most notably in their efforts to raise their children Jewish. Chapter Six examined how young Jews’ own experiences, as well as those of their older kin, motivated their child-rearing choices in a context of persistent insecurity and uncertainty. The decisions young Jews made in shaping the Jewishness of their children, I argued, shed light on their understandings of their own Jewishness, and on the question of being Jewish in post-Socialist Slovakia. While many young parents desired a more ‘positive Jewishness’ for their children, they faced tensions with the reality of their everyday lives, and the strategies they felt necessary to employ to make it safer. These tensions between their efforts to make their devotion visible within the Jewish community, while hiding it from non-Jewish others, highlight not only their persistent insecurity, but also what young Jews consider essential to what makes a person Jewish.

~

This thesis has explored the relationship between space, knowledge and insecurity, and the complexity and impermanence of the boundary between the private and
public, the domestic and the political. Given that information about one’s Jewishness — due to its kinship and political character — is both sensitive and dangerous, with potential to cause harm in the hands of someone untrustworthy, it is best kept secret, and compartmentalised into the private sphere. I have shown that while the boundary marking the unpredictable outside of the non-Jewish public is carefully guarded to keep Jewishness invisible, when looking at the space of home and community, the divide between ‘private’ and ‘public’ tends to change over time, as political regimes and socio-political contexts change. The home/house is usually regarded as a private space, but it can be expanded/extended to become public — as happened with Jewish weddings that took place under Socialism (Chapter Five). The space of the community is also of a rather complex character. Compared to the home/house, it represents a more public and politicised sphere, where one’s Jewishness may be contested, and where various statuses are ascribed and negotiated. At the same time, in contrast to the non-Jewish wider public, the Jewish community constitutes a ‘safe space’. In this sense, it is a sort of ‘private public’ — or what I have called a ‘Jewish public’ — where one need not fear antisemitic behaviour. A persistent sense of insecurity among Slovak Jews makes these two levels of public — or ‘publics’ — incompatible, and their separation key to preserving a sense of safety. Negotiating Jewishness across this boundary, Slovak Jews stretch and shrink the ‘private’ and ‘public’ to create ‘safe spaces’ where they can securely demonstrate allegiance and belonging. This stretching and shrinking, as I have argued, is a fundamentally political process.

Creating a notion of two distinct audiences, separated by each possessing different knowledge — or the lack thereof, I have suggested, enables people to communicate a desired message of their devotion without fearing potential discrimination or harm. Employing the strategies of ‘careful concealment’, however, people further reinforce this distinction, and reproduce their sense of insecurity and need for carefulness.

The intertwining of kinship and politics is perhaps most evident in the ubiquity of mistrust and its effects on relationships. Past betrayals — both those of non-Jews during the Second World War and Socialism, as well as of Jews who ‘disappeared’
from community life – produce chronic uncertainty in the Jewish community, which comes to define its sociality. Relationships are based on a ratio of knowledge (or secrets) shared and concealed, as Simmel (1906) noted. A lack of knowledge, as I have shown, maintains uncertainty and mistrust, leading to suspicion, caution, and limited investment. The need for trust implies one cannot be certain. But in such a politicised context, where past betrayals affect the present, trust is inevitably fragile – and so are the relationships it underpins. They mirror the social situation that constitutes them. The political nature of information about one’s Jewishness highlights the fragility of trust in relations that cross ethnic and religious boundaries, when uncertainty and a need for carefulness permeates even intimate relationships. But as I have shown, issues of mistrust arise even within the ‘safe space’ of the community, when loyalty or descent itself is in question. Different social statuses and distinctions created and maintained within a community that tries to manifest ‘sameness’, as I have argued, have a productive role in guiding social interactions, because they point to who may be trusted or not. Persistent uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of trust, in this politicised context, engender a need to prove one’s Jewishness and demonstrate allegiance.

The politics of Jewishness saturates both family and community life in Bratislava. In some families, people need to negotiate why Jewishness was kept secret and otherness veiled by efforts to blend in; in others, they need to find ways to combine and integrate Jewishness with their everyday lives. Learning about one’s Jewishness, as I have shown, has a constitutive effect on a person’s identification and the way they relate to others. It creates and reinforces a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. At the same time, this distinction does not only mark relations between Jews and non-Jews; it is also present within the community itself. Some distinctions are set by the Halakhah, others emerge in the light of everyday mistrust, and the political significance of decisions made on individual and familial levels. While some statuses are affected by personal choices – for example, when choosing to marry a non-Jewish partner – many are produced by the shadows of decisions made by older kin.

The strategies some families employed to make their Jewishness invisible during insecure times often resulted in dissociation, and are retrospectively
understood in terms of disloyalty and betrayal. While the aim was to veil the knowledge of Jewishness from non-Jewish others, these decisions often simultaneously disrupted social bonds and created suspicion when their descendants displayed that lack of knowledge in their return to the Jewish community decades later. The ‘foreignness’ of such families, and the invisibility of their observances during Socialism, and therefore of any proof of their devotion, marked them as ‘not entirely trustworthy’. Apart from a need to negotiate their Jewishness in the light of the Halakhah, young Jews from such families also face the necessity of navigating the distinctions made to raise suspicion about (or exclude) their older kin. Knowing becomes important on two levels – in terms of knowing traditions, either embedded in one’s upbringing or learned, and in terms of being known by others.

Because of the entanglements of kinship, religion and politics, Slovak Jews often feel a need to prove their Jewishness in reference to the Halakhah or the Law of Return of the State of Israel, and to address questions of their families’ ‘disappearance’ by demonstrating their allegiance and devotion to the heritage of their ancestors. Demonstrating such commitments in the space of a ‘Jewish public’, where it can be witnessed, is crucial for gaining social legitimisation and recognition on the community level. It is the performative act of making their devotion ‘public’, and knowledge about it visible to a community audience, that transforms young Jews from the unfamiliar and uncertain figures into known, accepted and eventually trusted ones. In this sense, for many young Slovak Jews, the process of learning about their Jewishness and Jewish traditions, of demonstrating their devotion and gaining acceptance and recognition, was more a matter of becoming than of simply being Jewish.

Showing that what makes a person Jewish is social recognition on a community level, this thesis has shed light on why demonstration matters, and how issues of trust are crucial yet unstable. The fragility of trust and relations became evident in the reaction of the community and the rabbi to Oliver after he refused to supply physical proof of his Jewishness and retreated from his active public roles. It was his status as
a ‘new Jew’, approaching community life only after 1989, and the fact that people
did not know his family, that raised questions concerning his trustworthiness – and,
in the end, concerning his Jewish descent. While Bartolomej, who did not know
Oliver’s family, had expressed doubt about Oliver’s status before, what triggered
widespread mistrust and suspicion on the community level was Oliver’s inability – or
unwillingness – to demonstrate his Jewishness with visible proof. The meaning of the
rabbi’s question of whether I had seen Oliver’s parents only made sense to me later,
when I realised that my claim of knowing Oliver’s family history was insufficient,
and that tangible proof – material evidence that could be held or seen (for example,
the birth certificate of a grandparent) – was needed. Oliver’s disappearance
underscored just how fragile trust relationships in the Jewish community are, and just
how quickly a glimmer of suspicion may destroy relationships. It showed, too, that
knowledge is powerful and important, and that practice on its own is insufficient
when tangible proof cannot be presented.
Bibliography


Salner, P. (2007) Budúci rok v Bratislave alebo Stretnutie. [Next Year in Bratislava or the Meeting]. Bratislava: Marenčin PT.


