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“YIZKOR”: A CASE OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY ACTIVISM IN A CZECH VILLAGE

The article explores the construction and preservation of Holocaust memory in the small Czech village of Kosova Hora. The study, based on focus group interviews, reveals how local Holocaust memory is shaped by a unique combination of activism, local history, and communal practices. The article highlights the role of a Jewish couple who, by rescuing and restoring the village synagogue during the Communist era, created a central site for Holocaust remembrance. This act of preservation catalyzed broader local engagement, resulting in a collective effort to remember the Jewish community that once thrived there. The synagogue now serves not only as a cultural and educational center but also as a place for religious commemoration, despite the absence of a local Jewish population. The research concludes that such localized efforts are crucial for sustaining Holocaust memory, showing how minority activism can embed itself within majority memory, even in small and seemingly ordinary communities.

Keywords: memory, activism, Holocaust, Kosova Hora, village, ethnography, focus group interview

INTRODUCTION¹

In this article, we introduce one case study from our ethnographic research for the Visegrad fund project *Research on Transgenerational Holocaust-memory in Central Europe*,

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which consisted of recording focus group interviews on the transgenerational memory of the Holocaust connected to specific sites of memory in the Czech Republic. Together with the main applicants of the research project, we consider it important, in addition to the victims who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust, to understand the practices and narratives of the present-day bearers of Holocaust memory. In this way, we can conceptualize the current state of Holocaust memory in Central Europe and its challenges.

In line with social scientific discourse, we think of memory as collective (Halbwachs, 2009), that is, as a shared space of experience, expectation, and practice (Assmann, 2001). Erll (2011, p. 8) emphasizes that:

[m]emories are not objective images of past perceptions, even less of a past reality. They are... highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation... *Re-membering* is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present... individual and collective remembering are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs of the person or a group doing the remembering in the present.

Memory represents a significant present connection between the past and the future, one that is constantly negotiated through various human and non-human actors assembled in commemorative networks (cf. Latour, 2005). At the same time, memory itself is productive – it is active through negotiation, mutual reference, and borrowing (Rothberg, 2009).

In the following text, we will observe memory as constantly produced and at the same time productive. We ask, 1) **who** are the present-day bearers of the local memory of the Holocaust; are they Jewish minority or non-Jewish majority actors?² 2) **how do they produce it**, i.e. what are **their main memory practices**? 2a) what **sites** of memory do they produce? We understand sites of memory as spaces where memory begins to work and compose images of the past into a story (Nora, 1998). In our case, these will be physical sites of memory (a synagogue, a memorial stone, or a plaque). We consider these spaces as social products of memory as well as its producers (cf. Lefebvre, 1991). 2b) What commemorative **performances** (Connerton, 1989) do they produce? 3) How do they **conceptualize** them? We viewed their narratives of Holocaust memory as constructed and performed in a specific research situation, thus analyzing the active, collaborative construction of the past in conversation (Welzer et al., 2010).

As per the methodological design of the project supplied by the main applicants, and together with their visual documentation team, we organized four focus group interviews in the Czech Republic. Each of them was in a different locality. The localities were chosen in a cooperation with our gatekeeper David Kraus. An ethnographic research and document analysis preceded the interviews. On this basis, in each locality, the interviewees were chosen with slightly different logic appropriate to the context of the locality, its history, and contemporary situation. We treated these four ethnographic field sites as four different cases. In the project task, there was the capital city, the middle-sized city, and one village or a small town with a historically documented Jewish settlement. For this article, we have chosen to introduce the case of how Holocaust memory is constructed and reflected upon at the smallest settlement chosen by us for the Czech part of the project.

² In this article, we observe Holocaust memory only in the relation to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING: *KABBALAT SHABBAT* IN KOSOVA HORA

The Kosova Hora village is located in the Příbram region in Central Bohemia, Czech Republic, approx. 80 km south of Prague. Formerly a township, this village has now approx. 1,400 inhabitants. We have learned about the remarkable story of the local Holocaust memory activism (Jurková and Seidlová 2020) already in the preparatory phases of the research project, both from our Jewish gatekeepers and media.³ That’s why, on Friday 15th of October 2021, we found ourselves in front of the rescued synagogue in Kosova Hora:

We stand in front of the former small town’s baroque synagogue, reading the Hebrew imperative ‘*Yizkor*’ (‘Remember!’) on the stone memorial, followed by a Czech sentence: ‘*Památce kosohorských Židů zavražděných v nacistických koncentračních a vyhlazovacích táborech*’ (‘In memory of the Jews of Kosova Hora murdered in Nazi concentration and extermination camps’). In Jewish tradition, *Yizkor* is also the name of a memorial prayer recited for deceased loved ones.⁴ Then, we walk around the building to enter a little Jewish square, where we find the main entrance to the building. The approx. thirty participants of the irregular Friday Evening worship (*Kabbalat Shabbat*), which takes place once a year, are already there. However, they are not locals, as the Jewish Community of the Kosova Hora has not been renewed after the Holocaust. Most of the participants arrived from Prague, the members of the Jewish Liberal Union (ŽLU). The place of honor in the first row belongs to the private owners of the synagogue, the Ehl family. We are all seated facing the *Aron HaKodesh* (“holy ark” in English), where the Torah scrolls are kept in a synagogue. It is typically located on the wall facing Jerusalem, the holiest place in the synagogue. However, this ark is empty, as the Torah of the prewar Jewish Community of Kosova Hora was first stolen by the Nazis, then sold by the Czechoslovak communist government to the United Kingdom, and now it is located in the Jewish Congregation of the San Geronimo Valley near San Francisco. The *Kabbalat Shabbat* service is led by the female *hazzan* of the ŽLU, Jaroslava Hannah Maxová, a former operatic singer, whose gentle yet powerful mezzo-soprano fills the space, while performing the liturgical pieces from the *siddur* (prayer book), sometimes accompanied by the voices of the community’s mixed choir. At one point, Mr. Ehl, the synagogue’s owner, is called in front. He unrolls a Torah-like scroll and reads the list of names written there. The names belong to the victims of the Holocaust from Kosova Hora (Fieldnotes, 15.10.2021)⁵.

³ “[Our journal] brought more extensive information about Kosova Hora, a small town near Sedlčany, in last year’s July issue, in connection with the completion of repairs to the local synagogue and its opening to the public. About a year later, a memorial to the local Holocaust victims was created and unveiled on 28 June 2013 by the local civic association Synagogue Kosova Hora and the municipality. It stands by the synagogue, in the middle of the former Jewish Quarter, which at its height had thirty numbers, a school and a mikveh or ritual bath. Most of the houses have survived to this day and in their totality represent an important urban unit. The way the local people remember their fellow Jews who were murdered by the Nazis or scattered to all corners of the world is exemplary. Thanks and appreciation are due to all those who have helped to ensure that the *yizkor*, remember, which is written in Hebrew in the text of the monument, remains in the memory of the place and the people who live there or come to visit.” (Daniček, 2013, p. 16). For further media representation see e.g. (Anon., 2007, Daniček, 2011, or Kratochvíl, 2013).

⁴ It is traditionally said in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Passover, and the second day of Shavuot. The prayer asks God to remember the souls of the departed and grant them peace.

⁵ Fieldnotes from the same event in 2022 and 2023 can be found in Škodová (2024, pp. 25–27).

The event has also been reflected on the website of the Jewish Liberal Union:

The dimly lit synagogue hall was the scene of a breathtaking commemoration, a deeply emotional event, as the last service was held there almost 80 years ago. The ŽLU Rimon Choir contributed to the festive atmosphere of the evening. Also present were Mr. Petr Ehl and his wife, who in 1987 purchased the ruined Kosova Hora synagogue and thus saved it from planned demolition. Mr. Julius Müller spoke about the history of Jewish settlement. Jews had lived here since the 16th century and in the 18th century they made up 35% of the town's population. After Kiddush, we met for dinner in a local small pub and promised to continue to revive the memorial sites and to remember the Czech Jews, whose legacy we respectfully claim and want to carry into the future (Anon., 2021).

Kosova Hora is a small, insignificant, at first glance quite ordinary village in the Central Bohemia Region. During our first visit to the village, we were struck by the strong echoes of its Jewish past and decided to choose it as a field site for our research project.

THE SITES OF MEMORY

The first mentions of Jewish settlement in Kosova Hora (historically also known under the German name Amschelberg) are from the 15th century. The Jewish ghetto was established in the 17th century; it consisted of approx. 30 houses surrounding a small square with a synagogue built in 1740. After the second half of the 19th century, the Jewish inhabitants were more than one-third of the local population. At that time, they began moving to Prague and other larger cities. As expressed by one of the participants of the interview, whom we introduce later:

00:11:18 Synagogue owner: There were four hundred Jews in the Kosova Hora in 1870 but at the time of the deportations, it was thirty-five.⁶

Almost none of the Jewish inhabitants have survived the Holocaust. Most of the original Jewish houses have been preserved to this day, including the cemetery and the synagogue.

Apart from the exceptionally high ratio of Jewish population in the city in the 19th century, a similar story could be told about many Czech and Moravian villages. As almost none of the Jewish inhabitants returned to the villages, cemeteries began to overgrow, synagogues began to crumble, and the Communist regime, which was in power in the former Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1989, certainly did not care neither for Jewish memory nor for the memory of the Holocaust. Similarly, the synagogue in Kosova Hora, which was owned by the Jewish Religious Community of Prague during Communism, was on the verge of disintegration in the early 80s and before demolition. The story of the rescue of the local synagogue is crucial for understanding how this building works as a main site of the local memory of the Jewish population and the Holocaust while triggering further local memory practices of an emergent heterogeneous commemorative network.

⁶ This and the following quotes are taken from a video-recorded focus group interview conducted by Novotná and Seidlová, Kosova Hora, 11.07.2023. Unless mentioned otherwise, the names of the interviewees are anonymized.

The synagogue was discovered by a Jewish couple who had nothing to do with Kosovo Hora, but they managed a unique feat: at a time when private ownership of a house other than for living or recreation (second homes, cottages) was not allowed in Czechoslovakia, they managed to buy the synagogue and neighboring rabbi's house, while claiming it as their house of recreation – i.e. their private weekend house or a “cottage” as the Czechs say.

The local Jewish memory activism of this couple, their insistence on rescuing a Jewish site despite and because of the loss of the local Jewish community, was such a rare act of resistance in Communist era Czechoslovakia, one sustained up to the present, that it calls for attention on its own. However, their efforts became a triggering point for the non-Jewish locals to construct the present memory of Kosova Hora with a significant layer of the Jewish past and the Holocaust. Therefore, we decided to organize one of the focus group interviews specifically in this village. We invited the couple who saved the synagogue, the mayor of the village, the vice-mayor, a local chronicler and former history teacher, a young history teacher, and one non-Jewish eyewitness of the Holocaust in Kosova Hora.

THE ACTIVIST'S STORY OF THE SITE'S RESCUE

The story of the rescue of the synagogue as a site of memory dominated the first part of the focus group interview. As the synagogue owner remembered:

00:36:11 Synagogue owner:

In the late '70s and '80s, my wife and I were documenting Jewish cemeteries and monuments in general, because... The commies, as if they felt that their time was soon over, they still demolished some of the remnants of synagogues that the Nazis had not had time to demolish and burn. Well, in the late '80s, they started to destroy even the cemeteries, too. So at various places, we didn't have time to document them, as there was a bulldozer going already, right? So when we were returning to Prague, we drove through Kosova hora. Well, we were at the cemetery, and I took photos of it. And then we were looking around the ghetto and in front of this impoverished synagogue [...] when the locals here saw some guy with two suitcases and a tripod, it didn't escape their attention. So they were watching, asking questions. And I said, the synagogue, what's up with it? They said: 'Don't go up there, it will fall on your head, it's terrible. It's going to happen anyway. It will be demolished. [...] I said, well, whose is it? And no one knew exactly. So I went to the national committee [...] They said: No, it's not ours, no. That's what the Jews have. I said, what Jews? They said, well, it's some community [the Jewish religious community of Prague]. They want to transfer it to our property, well, we'll tear it down. There is no money [for the reconstruction]. And repairing Jewish monuments? That was not popular at that time. So we arrived in Prague, and the next day, I went to the Jewish community. And as I've asked, they said, well, we do [own it]. I said they're gonna tear it down! They said, well, we don't know. [...] And I said: Okay, well, if they want to tear it down, then transfer it to me instead of the national committee and I'll fix it. And you're, like, some kind of... A company or something?, they asked. I said, no, a private person. They said, well, yeah, but we can't transfer that to you. [...] I said, well, I'm not an institution, so how do you want to do it? Well, we'd sell it to you. I said, okay, so sell it to me. Well, they said,

we'd have to make a price estimate. I said, make an estimate. [...] I haven't seen such a rush till then. Never seen it, can't even see it today. [Laughing]

While the institutions have been "relieved of this burden", the couple manually reconstructed the synagogue and the rabbi's house on their own, for all their private money:

00:42:27 Synagogue owner:

So you just buy it, you buy the synagogue, well. And then we spent years fixing it up. We put all our money into it, then we took out a mortgage. Well, so it was just fixing, fixing, fixing.

After the political turn in 1989, they established an NGO, Kosova Hora Synagogue:

00:42:50 Synagogue owner:

Then we set up a civic association so that we could get some funding, [...] well, you can't get that on your own, right? So we got some money from various institutions, even from private individuals. And then we went on to make this prayer house with this money because we had already collected it. Then it was finished. So we moved, and we sold our apartment in Prague. We've paid off the rest of the mortgage. Well, here we are.

Since then, the couple has been living in the neighboring rabbi's house. The NGO takes care of the building and since 2011, they have opened it to the public as a space for cultural events with a few boards on the history of Jews in Kosova Hora.

THE ACTIVIST'S STORY OF THE INVENTED MEMORIAL OBJECT

In the last few years, occasional Kabbalat Shabbat services have been organized here by one of the liberal Jewish communities in Prague, the Jewish Liberal Union. Their service which happens once a year at the end of August serves as a memorial service as well, when the synagogue's owner reads the names of the victims of the Holocaust from Kosova Hora from a Torah-like scroll, which the owner has ordered to be made for this purpose:

00:55:07 Synagogue owner:

It's in those Terezin books which you can download from the Internet. So you find these thirty-five people in them, with all their [data...] and the numbers of transports and everything completely. Well, that's it. It's not a problem. I just... had it done like this [Holocaust victims' names are written on the scroll]. Everybody's thinking, you got a Torah! I say, please, where would we get it from? [Kosova Hora's] Torah is over there in America, isn't it? [...] but this [memorial scroll...] is based on that prayer for the martyrs of the Shoah El Male' Rachamim. And, in Rabbi [Karol] Sidon's translation, in that prayer, it's also mentioned that [...] they're like the martyrs of the Torah, the victims. Well, I was saying, if they're martyrs of the Torah, then it could be made as Torah, and, so everybody's looking at it, and everybody really likes it. I have had the rollers made, it's like a Torah. And there are the names written on that canvas. Well, we always read them on Yom HaShoah. And then at that Kabbalat Shabbat service as well.

THE REFLECTIONS ON THE LOCAL YOM HASHOAH EVENT

00:56:54 Researcher 2: So you're organizing a Yom HaShoah?

00:56:56 Synagogue owner: Oh, sure, regularly. We alternate with [the city of] Sedlčany [...].

The mayor and vice-mayor of the village added further color to the image of the event:

00:57:11 Mayor:

This is one of the regular (event), I would call it, annual, as Mr. Ehl rightly says, Kosova Hora alternates with Sedlčany every year. And I have to admit, it's always crowded and it's a truly commemorative event. I am glad that we are regularly reminded of this here, and it is important to constantly remind ourselves of these things so that the younger generation in particular does not forget.

00:57:39 Vice-Mayor: It's good that there are school kids involved.

The Holocaust memorial event in the Kosova Hora synagogue is thus referred to as being performed by a majority to a majority (the locals taking it as their own memory) while having the intentionally transgenerational aspect. The synagogue which mostly lost its ritual function, becomes a meaningful site of memory not just through a few information boards about the local Jewish past, but mainly as a site of memorial performances with a newly invented symbolic quasi-religious art object. The Torah-like scroll with the names of the victims functions as a powerful tool of local memory production in the framework of the Yom HaShoah organized by the locals for the locals, remembering the victims primarily as locals, as well as during the exceptionally organized religious ritual (Friday evening worship) by the non-local Jewish people (with the active performance of the synagogue owner) to the non-local Jewish people, remembering the victims primarily as Jews.

THE LAST EYEWITNESS AND THE CHRONICLER: COMPLEMENTING NARRATIVES

Thus, the space of the synagogue also became a logical site for the focus group interview. With the cameras on, the space shaped its dynamics and provided a platform and listening audience for remembering by the local eyewitness. During the interview, the eyewitness constructed her narrative of the time of the deportations and before them, with the topic being commented on by the local chronicler:

00:11:53 Chronicler:

When the deportations happened, there was nothing to shop for. Sedlčany was already slowly evicted and the Kosova [Hora] citizens had nothing to buy because there were no local traders except bakers.

00:12:10 Eyewitness:

I kind of remember that time as a little girl, because I was born in 1933. And so I was six years old [...] when the Germans came. And then I remember well when they took them away when

there was this deportation of the Jews. Next to us, for example, here in the synagogue, there were the Lamberts, the couple, the elderly couple, and I remember them being taken away. And they put them in a truck that took them from Kosova Hora to Benešov and from Benešov to Terezín, right, they were concentrated there, then they were taken to Poland to those concentration camps. I remember that well. It was whole families. And every time they had a holiday, Mrs. Lambert would bake matzos and give them to us kids. And I also remember when the services were here, the rabbi would come, and we used to play here [in front of the synagogue] as kids ... it was called the Jewish market, and we would peek in the door [of the synagogue] and the rabbi would let us, as long as we didn't get naughty and disturb the devotion, he didn't chase us, nothing, he let us be and we played. We wanted to speak Hebrew too [...] there were about twenty of us, there were a lot of kids, we got along very well with them, we played with the kids and it was all so cool.

The eyewitness's narrative has been constructed nostalgically when without pause, the tragic event of the deportations of her Jewish neighbors was interspersed with happy memories of her childhood with her Jewish friends, a picture of an idealized past. She remained the only one in the village, who still remembers the victims personally. Together with the chronicler, they also remembered a local survivor:

00:20:49 Eyewitness:

[...] I went to Prague, [to] the chapel in the Jewish cemetery [i.e. the Pinkas Synagogue, which serves as a Holocaust memorial]. So all the Jews there, those who were from Kosova Hora, who lived here and were taken to those Concentration camps, they are all listed there. All the people I knew who lived here, they're in that chapel. Nobody came back, only one came back... Kaufmann. There were two of them, the Kaufmann brothers, Otto and Ludwig, so he came back. [Otto] didn't come back, but only his brother Ludwig came back. And with him came... Jirka Gertner. He came from Vrchlabí, where they had some kind of textile factory, in Vrchlabí, if you know. I think you do. [She turns towards the Chronicler.]

00:22:30 Chronicler:

[...] so I knew Mr. Kaufmann Ludwig. He used to visit my grandfather, my grandfather was friends with Jews. He spoke to them, in German. And he [Kaufmann] used to come to us. Then I was at his funeral and I'll show you where he's buried and so on. And he was telling why he survived.

At another moment of the interview, the chronicler mentioned other more or less local people identified as Jewish who survived the war:

00:53:00 Chronicler:

I would also like to say that Jehuda Poláček went to class with my father, but he served in the British army, so he was also actually a survivor, one of those Kosova Hora citizens, so we are slowly getting to those who are... There is also a certain Mrs Heřmanová mentioned here. But I don't think she lived in Kosova Hora.

00:32:00 Chronicler:

So, and let's not forget one more thing, that mixed marriages were normal here, yes, it was nothing against anything, so actually Hildegard Holan, née Stern, also survived the Holocaust de facto.

The absence of the survivors in the village has surely shaped the dynamics of the group interview, the tone of which has been remarkably respectful and warm, while speaking of the lost Jewish neighbors. The story of a mutually peaceful and beneficial co-existence has also resonated in the narrative of the chronicler (a former headmaster of the local elementary school), who has become an expert on the local Jewish past, giving us an extensive tour through the Jewish cemetery later.⁷ However, the behavior of the non-Jewish locals during and after the Holocaust was not mentioned throughout the whole focus group interview. The chronicler only briefly suggested the perspective of the locals from that period.⁸ Rather, the memory of the hundreds of years-long stable co-existence with a Jewish minority in this locality was more dominant than the memory of its tragic end. The other minorities and groups that became victims of the Holocaust have not been mentioned by the participants at all.

CONTESTING THE DOMINANT MEMORY LAYER

If the memory of the eyewitness and the synagogue owner has been constructed primarily emotionally, although from different perspectives (childhood with Jewish neighbors vs. identification with Judaism), the memory of the local chronicler has been rather systematic. For him, as well as for the mayor of the village, the Jewish past creates just one of the multiple layers of the place, even though important:

01:02:50 Synagogue owner:

I think that if it weren't for the Jews in the Kosova Hora, not even a dog would bark at this village.

01:03:00 Chronicler:

I don't think so. However, the medieval Czech word 'Hora' ('a mountain') means a place of mining. So when the mining probably died out here by the Hussite wars, the Jews became really like the movers and shakers. Everybody's been digging around their fields, whereas the Jews brought progress. Until the Holocaust, basically. Well, you're right about that.⁹

⁷ E.g., 01:07:19 Chronicler: Historically, no pogrom against Jews has been documented. Except for one [conflict]. That was more of a pub brawl. 1892. [...] then those cronies, during the village festival, they broke the windows of the synagogue and in the shop and so on. So that's the only 'pogrom' against Jews that happened here [...] So they just sort of got along.

⁸ 00:19:29 Chronicler: [...] that might have bothered the locals. I'd like to go back to the Holocaust. It was very strange to the local [Czech] people that the Jews were the ones who claimed the German nationality the most. They spoke German, they had German names, and the locals found it strange that the Germans were their greatest enemies, when in other times, they [the Jews] were so vehemently in favor of them. The Heller factories, for example...all their invoices were written in German until the Holocaust, yeah.

⁹ Cf. 00:24:54 Chronicler: But there were actually some big businessmen here, the local population didn't seem to be involved. And they still don't, yeah. Well, here's where I have to use the comparison with the Vietnamese ethnicity, because here today, the Vietnamese control the business. Because no one in Kosova Hora is attracted to business. He's got business and he's going to quit, he's just not willing to sacrifice that and... I was going to say something else, that there was in the 17th and 18th Century also a center of Jewish scholars. We mustn't forget that, because we're going to show the cemetery.

01:03:34 Mayor:

But otherwise, we would certainly not agree that Kosova Hora... that not even a dog would bark at it. It has its own rich history.

To reverse the impression that the minority's past forms the dominant memory layer of the village, the mayor and the chronicler mentioned other non-Jewish monuments of the Kosova Hora, such as the Renaissance castle. However, when mentioning their active part in the education of the locals about the preservation of the Renaissance houses, the significance of the village's heritage has been constructed again through the Jewish monuments.¹⁰ At the same time, the role of the activist Jewish couple in saving the synagogue as a local monument has been acknowledged in the interview by the village representatives,¹¹ pointing out further new secular functions of the building, such as a concert hall.¹² The activism driven by particular strong individuals logically becomes limited by issues, such as health.¹³ However, their efforts triggered further activities, when the local council began to nurture the memory of its Jewish past in the village public space. The village has placed visible notice boards advertising the synagogue, even though the synagogue is not a tourist place and is opened only upon request to the owner. There is also a stone monument in front of the synagogue, a floral decoration in the shape of the Star of David, and an accessible Jewish graveyard.¹⁴

THE MAYOR: A STORY OF THE MEMORIAL PLAQUE WITH ITS TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSGENERATIONAL CONTEXT

Even the present building of the Municipal office with an attached public park became a site of Jewish and Holocaust memory, although slightly contested:

00:50:30 The Chronicler:

So there you can see that actually a hectare of four hundred Jews and suddenly one Jew built a house with a garden that was as big as the whole ghetto. Yeah, and that house is the most lavish,

¹⁰ 01:04:15 Chronicler: We managed to save the Renaissance houses, right? T(o repair) this house here costs a lot of money, and it's not a heritage site, so the mayor and I, we argue that there must be a peaked roof and that they can't put plastic windows in there and so on. Or there's that ghetto too, that's all in the original place. So I think Kosova Hora is European significant because it had everything. Too bad there's not that Jewish school...

¹¹ 00:43:38 Mayor: I know this from a local government perspective. Kosova Hora was very lucky to find such hearthrobs who actually saved such a devastated building for future generations. So for that I would like to thank them very much, of course, because... the building will continue to be used here, the way they renovated it, it's beautiful.

¹² 00:44:10 Vice-mayor: The synagogue is also used for culture, there used to be nice programs here, too bad the covid interrupted it a bit. Really, I have experienced so many nice concerts and events here.

¹³ 00:44:22 Synagogue owner: There were some more (events) here, but it's true that now, we don't have those anymore. [...] And we have some medical problems now. 00:44:32 Synagogue owner's wife: But it would be good to put something together again. 00:44:36 Synagogue owner: But they have to put me together first... 00:44:36 Synagogue owner's wife: Well, I know, I understand, but it would be good to slowly do something about it again, because everything just runs to seed, doesn't it?

¹⁴ A property of the Federation of the Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic.

isn't it, it is the municipal office now. When I was headmaster of the school in 1991, Mr. Poláček from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv got the house in restitution. I don't know exactly now.

00:52:22 Mayor:

Mr. Poláček's descendants have been here several times to see already with their great-great-grandchildren the building, which serves as the municipal office, and their condition of the sale was that there would be a memorial plaque in the hallway of the municipal office saying that they lived there.

00:52:44 Synagogue owner:

I'd like to say that the plaque deserves to be outside on the building. And not in the hallway, where actually no one's coming, are they? Except for us who go there.

00:52:56 Mayor:

It's not over yet...

00:52:58 Synagogue owner:

No, well, that wouldn't be such a problem, would it?

While mentioning the memorial plaque on the Municipal Hall building, the story of its previous owner, a local Holocaust survivor, has been further revealed. The transnational path of Julius Yehuda Poláček (1920, Kosova Hora – 2000, Jerusalem, Israel) has been tangled with the story of his family's house in Kosova Hora, which was confiscated during the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, remained as such during the Communist era (when it was used as an elementary school) and has been successfully claimed back by him and his family from Israel only in the early 1990s, after the political turn in Czechoslovakia in 1989. The point of the memorial plaque being a condition of the sale of the building to the municipality reveals the active role of a survivor's descendants in the local memory production for the first time in the interview. The mayor's pointing towards the transgenerational aspect of the transborder, transnational family remembering activated by the need to regain the family heritage of a (at that time badly demolished) building and sell it to the municipality to save it, has been further emphasized by his mention of personal visits of the survivor's descendants during the searching-for-family-roots travels. The mayor contextualized his narrative of re-purposing the Poláček's estate through the council's further activities "to commemorate Jewish history".¹⁵

¹⁵ 00:48:06 Mayor: It's true that both the park and the building of the original school,... the house was basically devastated. It's also, I guess, there was a demolition plan. The municipality was still considering demolition under the previous mayor. And sometime in the year 2002, the previous mayor František Pilík tried very hard to save the building, to repair it. Which was a great credit of his. And with the help, of course, of both state support and subsidies, he managed to save this object. Of course, we are trying, because we are proud of our history, so we are trying now, at the present time, the present council, within our financial means, to commemorate Jewish history. So to that end, we have basically had the plaza repaired, and the Star of David in

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The former and the present history teachers have then highlighted the transgenerational aspect of the local memory from the non-minority's perspective while bringing up the Yom HaShoah memorial event again:

00:57:50 Chronicler:

Not only do children from the [elementary] school participate, but it is a tradition here that Kosova Hora [high school] students...when they do some term papers, the only topic is either the Holocaust, that or so... even the [university students...], so I always have to give them the materials. And so if they need some interesting original topic, they always find it here. Topic [for a] term paper, or a Master thesis even.

The current history teacher, herself a generation younger than the chronicler, confirms his words, pointing out that the students from this region who study with her at the high school in a nearby town are interested in the subject of the Holocaust, especially through the lens of local memory.¹⁶ She has been actively involved in the local memory production herself as one of the volunteers who researched and translated period documents, which are presented on the information boards in the synagogue, and which she then presents to the students who visit the space with her.¹⁷

APPENDIX: NOT EVERYTHING IS AS IT SEEMS

Let us return to 2021, when we first visited Kosovo Hora for an extraordinary memorial service:

The service ended with a joint kiddush (toast) by all present. We walk outside the synagogue and see a large piece of cloth draped over a large pile of cut wood at the opposite house in the evening gloom. It certainly wasn't there before the service, but no one pays attention to it now

the middle with the beautiful trees is a reminder of that. We took advice from architects, of course. And I'm kind of happy about it. And we believe it is a worthy reminder of the Jewish settlement in Kosovo Hora. And it is not the end, because we would like to improve this picturesque area of the Jewish market. But this will of course be subject of negotiations with the property owners. I suppose that will be more complicated. But there are no small challenges.

¹⁶ 00:58:33 Teacher: And I can confirm that students are indeed interested in this topic, [...]. They are not interested in some old history, but, as they say themselves, they are interested in the history that still concerns them now, and in fact, we can actually [apply] the history of the Holocaust to the topic that of course still concerns them now, because the immediate, [...] the 20th century [history] is attractive for them and the local theme is attractive here.

¹⁷ 00:44:47 Chronicler: I would like to remind you that thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Ehl [Synagogue owners], The Kosova Hora's historiography has also progressed. Behind us, we see various new documents that have been discovered and here a professor from the grammar school translated them for us because she has studied old German. And thanks to her, the (knowledge of) history of Kosova Hora has shifted a lot.

either. What catches our eye, however, is its colorfulness. One of us asks the chazan: ‘Look, isn’t that a Palestinian flag?’ ‘Yes, it is a Palestinian flag’, she says, a little surprised. ‘And what do you think of that?’ ‘That’s just antisemitism,’ she replies. ‘Do you think it’s antisemitism?’, I ask. ‘And how else would you like to understand it?’, she replies a little sternly (Fieldnotes, 15.10.2021)¹⁸.

We consider this situation to be significant in illustrating the complexity of Holocaust memory. In fact, it provokes us to ask ourselves how the current inhabitants of the community contemplate the memory of the Holocaust in moments when we do not directly ask about it. Looking at the village website, the synagogue and cemetery are mentioned among the monuments, but they are not so prominent compared to the narrative led by the mayor and the chronicler in our interview. Indeed, the Holocaust is described on the village website as follows: “The advent of fascism greatly affected life in Kosova Hora. Virtually the entire Jewish community left.”

Suddenly, this surprisingly stark statement puts Kosova Hora back among the many Czech and Moravian communities that, in constructing narratives of local memory, still tend to soften, if not displace, the burning moments of 20th century history.

CONCLUSION

We followed a story in which a married couple’s extraordinary activism built a unique place of remembrance for both the Jewish community and the Holocaust in a small, otherwise unremarkable community. The Jewish owners of the synagogue have gained the respect of the locals during their four decades of involvement, preserving a local Jewish memory site as a cultural-educational as well as a (potentially) sacred place. Thus, the memory practice of a particular, originally non-local activist couple was crucial in constructing the public local memory of the Holocaust by saving and repairing the synagogue, thereby materializing and anchoring that memory in the middle, right in the center of the village (as opposed to the Jewish cemetery, which is also preserved, but lies off to the side of the village, as is customary). The restoration of the synagogue included the installation of an exhibition on the history of the synagogue and the Jewish community of Kosova Hora and, above all, a unique material reminder of its demise: a Torah-shaped scroll with a list of the names of local Jews who perished during the Holocaust.

The whole combination (a restored synagogue in the center of the village, with an unusual story of restoration and an even more unusual scroll), leads to the fact that the synagogue itself can also be seen as an actor of remembrance. As such, it attracts Jewish actors’ practices, ranging from a religious ritual with a commemorative moment (the yearly Friday evening service of an incoming Jewish group with reading of the names of the victims from the Torah-like scroll), through the *Yom HaShoah* event with the decisive participation of the non-Jewish local elite), up to some other practices that extend into the public space and whose

¹⁸ It must be stressed that we conducted the entire research before 7 October 2023, i.e. before the situation in which the use of Israeli and Palestinian symbolism to express attitudes not only towards the conflict has multiplied as a result of the dramatic escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

actors are the village elite, including the village leadership (and, marginally, a survivor's descendants from Israel).

Thus, in addition to the preserved Jewish Quarter, with its restored synagogue and the nearby cemetery, several new material objects have been added that are either direct sites of memory or explicitly refer to them (the Holocaust memorials in front of the synagogue and the cemetery, the commemorative plaque at the Municipal Office, the system of tourist signs, the floral decoration at the synagogue with an explicitly Jewish symbol). At the same time, the synagogue hosted cultural and educational events such as concerts, school excursions, etc. As a result, the village has constructed the local Jewish memory as an indispensable part of the village's multiple memory layers (moreover without commercializing it).

What can be seen is also heard during the focus group interview: despite the differences in narrative modes, an empathic, nostalgic, locally grounded, but at the same time somehow standardized memory of the Holocaust, a consensus on the understanding of it as the ultimate tragedy, resisting the narratives of denial and anti-Semitism, and a consensus on the necessity of the constant reproduction of this memory carried throughout the interview.¹⁹ This would again support the thesis that minority memory here has become part of majority memory.

Nevertheless, what emerges as visible may obscure other layers. The memory practices and their publicly approved understanding require a specific setting (people, place, time). Inside and around the synagogue, as well as during the focus group interviews, local practices and understandings of Holocaust memory appear exemplary, even idyllic: alive, nurtured, and reproduced over the long term. However, the moment we step out of this setting, it may turn out that it is not necessarily universally shared. Yet it leaves a distinct mark on public space. Thus, the memory of the Holocaust does not form a fixed composition, but is continuously composed through commemorative networks of actors, if the appropriate conditions are in place. In the case of Kosova Hora, we wanted to show that the impetus for creating such conditions can be the initially modest minority activism of a single couple.

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¹⁹ However, it is worth noting that this is undoubtedly influenced by our selection of the sample, which was deliberately chosen in the context of the story of the field site. At the same time, it is important to notice that in all the places of our research, we were addressing rather socio-cultural elites who were interested in the process of identity and memory construction in various aspects.

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