STUDIA HUMANISTYCZNE AGH Tom 23/2 • 2024

https://doi.org/10.7494/human.2024.23.2.6623

Katalin Schwarz*

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
ORCID: 0009-0007-9292-8197

LOCAL MEANINGS OF THE HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN ZRENJANIN (SERBIA)

The choosen topic of my paper was local meanings of the memory of the Holocaust in Zrenjanin. The main questions of my research dealt with the research community's general attitude, stereotypes, and prejudices towards Jews. I deemed it relevant to examine the current situation and the importance of the memory of the Holocaust. I assumed that the answers to these questions could bring out the existing deficiencies of current local and general strategies of remembrance and contribute to a critical reconsideration of these efforts. The aim of my research was also to contribute to the exploration and analysis of the local and personal empirical depths of memory. I wanted to record the constructed and reconstructed personal narratives of the generation of survivors and witnesses, and the narratives of the next generations. In this study, I have also strived to process and interpret recent meanings of the memory of the Holocaust.

Keywords: local meanings of the memory, Jews, memory of the Holocaust

INTRODUCTION

I have chosen the local meanings of the memory of the Holocaust in Zrenjanin[1] to be the topic of my article. The main questions of my research dealt with the research community's general attitude, stereotypes, and prejudices towards Jews. I deemed it relevant to examine the current situation and the importance of the memory of the Holocaust. I assumed that the answers to these questions could bring out the existing deficiencies of current local and general strategies of remembrance and contribute to a critical reconsideration of these efforts.

The idea for the research was inspired by a research project lead by my thesis supervisor Richárd Papp together with György Csepeli and their colleagues from Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland titled *Transgenerational Holocaust Memory in Central Europe*. While this research

* Department of Sociology Sciences, Interdisciplinary Social Research PhD Programme, Budapest, Hungary; e-mail: schwarzkati@student.elte.hu.

[1] In Serbian also: Veliki Bečkerek and Petrovgad (depending on the historical period), in Hungarian: Nagybecskerek, in German: Groß Betschkerek) – a city in Serbia, located in the province of Vojvodina, in the Banat region.

did not include field sites in Serbia, I have used some of the methodological approaches and findings for my work. The aim of my research was to contribute to "the exploration and analysis of the local and personal empirical depths of memory".[2] In this study, I have striven to process and interpret recent meanings of the memory of the Holocaust through exploring narratives, sites of remembering and symbols of memory of the Holocaust in Zrenjanin. In this article, I present the interpretations from the emic perspective, a "perspective formed from the inside of a group"[3] (Boglár and Papp, 2008, p. 256) and also point out the deficiencies in general strategies of remembering.

The theoretical framework of my research was based on Aleida Assmann (2016, 2018) and Jan Assmann's (1999) interpretative approach, according to which I tried to interpret the material collected in the field, I also examined the "meanings of non-Jewish transgenerational memory patterns" in the selected territory.[4]

The research community lives in Zrenjanin in the Banat region of the province of Vojvodina in Serbia. The town is in Central Banat, located on the bank of River Bega and is the capital of the Central Banat district. According to the 2022 Census data,[5] the municipality of Zrenjanin (the town and the surrounding villages) had 105,722 inhabitants, thus it ranked as the third largest city in Vojvodina behind Novi Sad and Subotica. While the number of people who claim to be Jews is the census is very small in Serbia (709 according to the 2022 data), the number of those people who are associated with local Jewish communities is bigger. Currently, according to my estimation, there are around a hundred people in some way related to the Zrenjanin Jewish community. The present-day Jewish community in Zrenjanin defines its own Jewishness as an ethnic group and not along the lines of religious affiliation. They consider themselves to be a secular Jewish community.

METHODOLOGY

The main method applied during the fieldwork was interviews with the community members, supplemented by participant that served the purpose of providing a deeper understanding of the context. I originally intended to use archival research as well but already at the outset I faced a difficulty in terms of the Zrenjanin archives. Owing to the kindness of a helpful archivist, I received the information that their archival corpus is fragmentary, unarranged, and essentially useless. During World War II the occupiers burnt most of the documents that had been officially accessible in the city.

Participant observation was only fulfilled partially because "immersion" in the traditional anthropological sense, that entails living with the community for an extended period of time, was not feasible. I conducted around ten interviews with members of the Jewish community and other non-Jewish social actors, which I recorded in audio format with the subjects' consent.

[2] Research on Transgenerational Holocaust Memory in Central Europe. https://www.holocaustmemory.org

[3] Translations of all Hungarian and Serbian language sources and interviews have been done by the author.

[4] Research on Transgenerational Holocaust-Memory.

[5] https://www.stat.gov.rs/.

During the interviews, community members often volunteered to show me various objects such as family relics, photographs, diaries, and treasured documents. According to Peter Burke, the vehicles of memory, including oral ones such as stories and traditions, written vehicles like memoirs and other records, visual vehicles like photographs and paintings, commemorations such as actions that convey memories, and space itself as a vehicle of conveying memories, all have an active influence on memory (Burke, 2005, p. 85). I examined all of the vehicles of memory during my research. I also kept a field diary, which, eventually, became a stage for presenting my anxieties, difficulties, and, often, sadness.

MY ROLE AS A RESEARCHER

As an anthropologist, I often ponder whether we have done or are doing enough to objectively represent the Jewish community. I felt the need to put into wider context the activities, opinions and reactions of the Jewish community of Zrenjanin, to attempt to explain and interpret the antisemitism they – and also other social actors – face on a daily level.

I ran into difficulty in defining my status at the outset of the research. Compliant with the general discourse research methodology, it is necessary to define whether the researchers are members of the research community, and they should strive to describe the given culture from the outside, putting aside their own culture (Boglár and Papp, 2008, p. 256). I was born in Zrenjanin and have spent three quarters of my life so far there as a resident, as a member of the Hungarian minority. In light of this, I found myself confronted with a dilemma as to my position vis-à-vis the research community. According to András Gergely: "Mutual otherness is, therefore, the first, most important, but at the same time pivotal experience of identicality of the most certainly attributable distinction between the world of the researcher and the researched" (Gergely, 2010, p. 137)[6]. He also claims that this can also be experienced at both the individual level and the level of cultural differences and in his opinion, any research in that field is full of challenges. Responding to these challenges, I will attempt to put myself in such a researcher position, which is not the "state of disfavor/dislike caused by otherness" but appears as an attempt to collectively build a meeting point of the diversity of cultures" (Gergely, 2010, p. 137). At the same time, pursuing my basic sentiments, namely, that I have not chosen my target research group intending to emphasize the superiority or inferiority of another culture, I find it necessary to underline that I want to contribute – with my research results and modest possibilities – to mitigate the phenomenon of negative opinion about the Jewish community.

I assume the difficulties I encountered during my research explain why socio-scientific research in the development of the former Yugoslav state and society circumvented the issues related to the existence, problems, inter-communal organization of national minorities and their relation to the majority society and the state. In the case of my research, I try to fill in the blanks with local writers' books about Jews and publications, mostly memoirs and biographies, issued country-wide after World War II.

[6] I have translated all quotations from sources as well as interviews from Hungarian and Serbian to English.

As the research advanced, it became clear to me that I should go deep back in time to get a full picture of the Jewish community's life in Zrenjanin. To profoundly understand the root causes of later events and the present life of Jews in Zrenjanin, I found it appropriate to study the period from the settlement of Jews in the city through the time interval before World War II until their deportation, but I refer to these periods only briefly.

Upon positioning my role as a researcher, I will elaborate on the ethical questions related to the research community conforming with the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association in the subsection below.

ETHICAL ISSUES

"Anthropologists have moral obligations as members of other groups, such as the family, religion, and community, as well as the profession" (AAA, 1998).

With due respect to the privacy rights of the subjects of interviews, even though they did not request to be referred to anonymously, I use the initials of their surname and their full forename in order to reveal their identity only partly and thus to avoid the possibility that they become targets of any atrocity.

Owing to ethical reasons, I will not represent existing conflict situations and relations experienced in the Jewish community in Zrenjanin in the present article the, and information obtained from confidential situations. Although my experience is that these social relations are needed for an in-depth understanding of a community and their perception is indispensable for the anthropologist's research, I believe that they do not and may not affect the successful interpretation of the final analysis. The main objective of my research was to present the research community, to analyze narratives heard during the fieldwork through thinking together with the community members, and by no means to judge or generate new conflicts. "In a field of such complex involvements and obligations, it is inevitable that misunderstandings, conflicts, and the need to make choices among apparently incompatible values will arise. Anthropologists are responsible for grappling with such difficulties and struggling to resolve them in ways compatible with the principles stated here" (AAA, 1998). With this in mind, I tried to act accordingly during my whole research.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ZRENJANIN

JEWS IN YUGOSLAVIA BEFORE WORLD WAR II

In the post-World War I period the awareness of young Jews in Zrenjanin on national identity was formed based on knowledge acquired during their studies in Vienna and Prague (Fogel, 2013). They were under the immense influence of the Jewish Alliance founded at that time, the Yugoslav religious self-governments, and some other Jewish organizations likewise the increasingly stronger Zionist movement; however repeated and growing anti-Jewish activities intensified the feelings of insecurity and discomfort. Growing awareness

of national identity among the Jewish youth increased the number of those who joined international labor movements and became their outstanding members and leaders. It was the "era of latent antisemitism" (Goldhagen, 2017) which later exploded in various scenes and forms of manifestation.

The second period, from 1933 to 1941 was characterized by the more powerful presence of the Nazi ideology. Germany started the harmonization of policing and secret service activities with the work of sympathizers living outside German territories. The cooperation between the Yugoslav and German police was established, secret agreements were made and the Kulturbund[7] acted as a pivotal agent of the German intelligence service. Especially the youth educated under the aegis of the Kulturbund played a significant role in the swift and effective implementation of the Holocaust. Beyond the aforementioned, there was a multitude of collaborators who were renowned personalities of the Yugoslav political, cultural, and public life and active participants of Krauss'[8] intelligence service network. By the end of this period, the government adopted anti-Jewish regulations and intensified antisemite propaganda, which was financially supported by various German institutions in Yugoslavia, such as the Yugoslav Community of Germans. Anti-Jewish newspapers and magazines were published. This was the period when the persecution of Jews started elsewhere in Europe as well, like in Austria, Germany, Poland, and Czechia. Jewish families fleeing Nazi atrocities traveled in large numbers through Yugoslavia to Palestine and other safe territories (Fogel, 2013). The Federation of Yugoslav Jewish Association took care of their reception and helped them. The presence of refugees led to the intensification of already ongoing antisemitic actions, incitement to hatred, and various anti-Jewish events were organized *en masse*. As a consequence of the rise of Nazism in Austria and Czechia, Jewish students who studied there returned home and started to spread ideas acquired during their studies in Vienna and Prague and believed that the victory of socialism would bring a solution to the problems of European Jews and – under the given circumstances – it would be the most optimum political way out.

THE ROAD TO THE HOLOCAUST

In the pre-World War II period, 1,540 Jews lived in Zrenjanin while only 75 survived the Holocaust. In 1941, after the German occupation, the communal life of local Jews completely ceased to exist. The torture of the Jewish population and the plunder of their property started at the very outset of the German occupation of Yugoslavia. "The Volksdeutche[9] population from Banat and Belgrade played a significant role in this process, especially those young people who were educated under the aegis of the Kulturbund founded earlier. The registration and stigmatization of Jews started in April 1941. A series of humiliating and other discriminative measures, among others forced labor, was introduced. Jews from Zrenjanin were forced to

[7] The Kulturbund (in German: Schwäbisch-Deutcher Kulturbund) was an organisation of the Germans in Banat, Bačka and Srem, as a cultural organisation in the beginning and during World War II it supported the occupier and promoted German Nazism.

[8] Karl Krauss, an SS captain who was the central figure of the Yugoslav intelligence services.

[9] According to Nazi German terminology, such persons whose language and culture were of German origin but did not hold German citizenship.

clean streets by their hands, to clean the toilets of Germans and do other most humiliating works in public, before the eyes of other citizens." (Koljanin, 2012).

One of the significant factors in carrying out the Holocaust quickly was the number of Jews in this territory, and, last but not least, their status in the social structure, in the cultural and political life and their attachment to their tradition. Many highly educated Jews successfully held high offices in culture, economy, and politics in Zrenjanin and boosted the city's architecture and infrastructure. The interviewed Jew and non-Jew respondents during my research shared the opinion that the persecution of Jews could – to a large extent – happen because of the sentiments of "jealousy", and "fear of losing power" against them during long decades of history and the interwar period as well.

"Elsewhere in Banat, but mostly in Zrenjanin, several significant differences could be observed in carrying out the process of Holocaust and the perpetrators, the locations of executions, the method, circumstances and timing of crimes undoubtedly deviate from the extermination of the Jewish population in other German, Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, Albanian, Croatian and Central European territories." (Koljanin, 2012). "Most of the victims died right there, in Yugoslavia, before the death camps in the East were at full speed" Subotić (2019, p. 32). The following subsection deals with the deportation of Jews who lived in the territory of my research.

THE DEPORTATION OF JEWS OF ZRENJANIN

The Holocaust in Zrenjanin started at the very beginning of the German occupation, on April 19, 1941, at 10 a.m., when, after being tortured, Viktor Elek, the city's most successful industrialist, and seventeen of his non-Jewish compatriots (Partisans, resistance movement sympathizers and other individuals with anti-German views) were executed in the Baglyas neighborhood of the city in the presence of a large number of local German people. The murder of this wealthy sugar mill owner by hanging was not a random choice. The execution, and also the whole process of the Holocaust, was a crime carried out in a precisely planned and cruel manner. Viktor Elek was an outstanding expert in the cultivation and processing of sugar beet. Invited by the manager of the local sugar mill founded earlier, he arrived in Zrenjanin in 1911. Soon after that, owing to his honest and diligent work, he was elected the manager of the mill (Németh, 2004). A Czech by origins, Elek became a renowned citizen of Zrenjanin and was known as an eminent expert in sugar production who quickly integrated into the social and cultural circles of the city on the banks of River Bega. Local citizens remembered him as a generous benefactor to sport and culture. The aim behind his public execution by hanging was to set an example for the rest of the population and to intimidate. Viktor Elek was falsely accused of inappropriate behavior towards his Hungarian and German workers. However, it was obvious that the German authorities aimed to take control of the sugar mill. On the day of his execution, posters, and public notices with his photo and time of execution appeared around town. After the execution, local German citizens ridiculed the dead man's corpse making gross remarks (Németh, 2004).

Later, on August 18, 1941, the gathered Jewish citizens were transported by ships on River Bega to Belgrade: men at 10 a.m., and women and children at noon. All the Jews of Zrenjanin

– except for a few who managed to escape arrest – were taken from the local concentration camp[10] and squeezed into the vessels. Once they arrived in the metropolis, women, children and the elderly were placed in the synagogue in Belgrade and private houses. Men were immediately transported to the Topovske šupe[11] concentration camp. Three months later, all the Jews of Zrenjanin were transported to the Sajmište[12] camp, where most of them froze or starved to death, or died of pain during vivisection. Some of the deported Jews were secretly executed in the village of Jabuka, near Pančevo. Every morning and evening during the winter, a gas van specially developed for the rapid extermination of Jews, arrived in Sajmište where the victims were loaded and taken to their final trip. "It is also the central site in the topography of the Holocaust in Serbia, as half of all Serbian Jews were killed there within a few short months in the spring of 1942." (Subotić, 2019, p. 21). What happened to the small number of Jews in Zrenjanin who survived? I will seek the answer to it in the next subsection.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ZRENJANIN AFTER WORLD WAR II

As Tzvetan Todorov stated: "Communists also carried out a crusade against memory" (2003, p. 9). According to him: "Totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century have revealed the existence of a danger never before imagined: the blotting out of memory". The Yugoslav state undertook laborious efforts to do so after World War II, re-writing, reconstructing, and overwriting the whole concept of the pre-war Yugoslavia and introducing new paradigms. "The communist focus on antifascism as a military and ideological battle with the ultimate triumph of the communist idea, therefore, completely effaced the unique experience of the Jews" (Subotić, 2019, p. 40).

A prime example of a paradigm shift is the meaning of the palimpsest concept, e.g. the selection of the remembrance day for "all Serb victims".[13] This is legal and legitimate but remembering "only Serb" victims seems exclusive and ethnocentric. Neither the International Holocaust Remembrance Day nor the main Jewish holidays[14] appear in the list of officially recognized holidays. I would argue that the huge number of Serb victims is an indisputable fact, but it is also true that local Jewish communities literally perished (Judenfrei) from the territory of Serbia during World War II as a result of the genocide carried out there, while the persecution and suffering of the Roma were also significant and especially horrific.

Under the slogan of brotherhood and unity, the Yugoslav, and currently the Serb identity and Serb history of origins have completely been remade and "lies and inventions replace reality, searching out and spreading the truth is forbidden" (Todorov, 2003, p. 10). The administrative

[10] The building is currently home to the present-day Agricultural High School.

[11] Topovske šupe was the first concentration camp in Belgrade, where about four thousand Jews from Banat and an unknown number of Roma were interned by the German authorities from August to 12 December 1941.

[12] The Sajmište concentration camp was an extermination camp from September 1941. It is also known as the Jewish Camp of Zemun (in German: Judenlager Semlin). In late 1941 and early 1942 thousands of Jews and Roma were executed there in gas vans.

[13] 7th July, the day of uprising against Fascism in Serbia is still a state holiday.

[14] For example: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Passover (the Israelites' departure from ancient Egypt), Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) or Hanukah (Festival of Lights).

bodies of the post-World War II communist state led by Tito deliberately manipulated social memory. Things deemed as "embarrassing elements" (for example, they have excavated the concentration camp victims' bones, burnt and dispersed them, manipulated photos, material memories, torn out undesirable pages of books, isolated individuals who remembered or attempted to remember to Goli Otok, a deserted, desolate, barren islands of the Adriatic Sea) were removed after Tito's death, the fall of the Yugoslav government and the creation of new states by ex-Yugoslav republics respectively, and history was "re-scratched" by each new political leadership. Collective memory was reduced to memories of Serb identity.

I analyze the remembrance strategies about the deportation of local Jews because thereby we can observe how "re-remembrance" happened after the fall of communism when "the tendencies for corrections in view of the past" intensify and the "need for a more differentiated approach" appears (Bíró, 2016), which means the national identity-formation of those living in the new states seceded from former Yugoslavia. "Yugoslavism is reassessed" (Bíró, 2016), the issue of national identity is reconstructed, origin, and religion become important. The culture of memory has radically been changed and diverse minority commemoration events occur.

ANALYSIS OF LOCAL SPACES OF MEMORY

In the post-World War II period, different political changes such as the fall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia took place in the territory researched for my article encompassing an area of former Yugoslavia, nowadays Serbia, especially during the time of regime changes in the 1990s. There was a strong link between the political powers and the symbols and, rather, the power of handling the memories during these transitions. The Jewish community of Zrenjanin functioned according to the rules of such institutionalized memory. The local Jewish community was founded in 1994.[15] Three years later, in 1997, the community succeeded in putting an A4 paper-size memorial tablet designating the location of the synagoguewhich had been demolished by German occupiers.[16]

"The extermination of the European Jewry was not only carried out behind the barbed wires of concentration camps, hidden from plain sight. It was also carried out in public view of non-Jewish citizens of these countries, on streets, squares, and farms across Eastern Europe. Non-Jews benefited from this Jewish erasure, often for generations after the Holocaust" (Subotić, 2019, p. 52). The main scene of Holocaust-related historical suffering in Zrenjanin is the location where Viktor Elek and his companions were executed first, the concentration camp and the place from where Jewish citizens were loaded on barges. A check of whether these venues are designated and how have these been integrated into the whole of the city will provide a clear picture of the relation to scenes of past and suffering. These places in the city did not become an appropriate space for commemorating memories of genocide, individual, and collective traumas. The neglect and lack of designation of these places can also be interpreted as a desensitization process aimed at pushing the sufferings of the victims,

[15] www.jozrenjanin.rs.

[16] Built in 1896 based on Lipót Baumhorn's design and demolished by the German occupiers in 1941.

the survivors and other affected generations into the background. This phenomenon could also be interpreted as an attempt to marginalize the guiltiness of non-Jew citizens during World War II, namely, that historical facts were overwritten, that they sought to deny their cooperation with the German occupiers or their indifferent behavior towards the victims. Therefore, subsequent commemoration and transgenerational memory are subject to errors rooted in various causes (Martinoli, 2012). For example, the location of the concentration camp is marked only by a memorial tablet placed by the "Commemoration Committee of the 20th Anniversary of the Uprising in Zrenjanin" on October 2, 1961.[17] The memorial tablet itself is mounted so high that the text on it is barely legible to the naked eye for a person of average height.[18] Each year during the annual commemorations organized by the Jewish community, an active – and by the way the tallest – member, representative of the Chevra Kadisha, my respondent, Stevan S. is the one who puts the wreath up on the tablet with a long rod he made.[19] This memorial tablet can be seen as both present and absent, since it does exist but is hardly visible. Although its wording explicitly reminds us of the Jewish victims, it is unclear who are the commemorators. Their ethnicity is not revealed to the next generations, thus it is not clear who pays tribute to the victims: only those who were affected or also representatives of other local ethnic groups. "The building used as a concentration camp during World War II, now the Agricultural Secondary School, was built in 1880 as a barrack of the Hungarian Army (honvéds) and later refurbished as a police headquarters. In the post-war period it was used by the Yugoslav Army until 1968. The building is under the protection of the Novi Sad-based Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments", says the school's website;[20] yet, as another example of it being at the same time present and absent, we cannot find it listed on the website of the indicated institute.[21] I found the following data on the website of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Zrenjanin: "During the occupation, the barrack's basement rooms were used for the imprisonment of Jews and communists."[22] According to Stevan S.'s account, in the previous year, on Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, 2022 – coinciding with the day of the patron saint of Serbian education and culture, St. Sava: "*The school's history teacher came here, invited me inside the school building, offered me refreshment and told that, according to his plans, from the next year on, they would pay more attention to the education of students about the history of the building. This was the first time since I have come here for commemorations that I met a person interested in what is happening next to the school walls*." [23]

---

[17] Today the institution of the Secondary School of Agriculture.

[18] "During the first days of occupation, this building was a temporary camp where 1278 Jews of Zrenjanin passed through. The enemy transported them to death camps from there. Only thirty eight Jews survived the war in our city."

[19] The Chevra Kadisha is an important institution of Jewish communities. Beyond taking care of a deceased persons and their families, it is also the pivotal charity organization aimed at supporting the poor and the sick.

[20] http://zrpoljoprivredna.edu.rs.

[21] http://pzzzsk.rs.

[22] http://zrenjaninheritage.com.

[23] Saint Sava was the founder of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church, the first Serbian archbishop, teacher, writer, translator and diplomat. January 27 is a school holiday in 1840 to honor Saint Sava's merits.

My other respondent, László B. said that he had no idea that it was a concentration camp: "*My mother was a teacher in the Agricultural School. Back then, long ago, there was no plaque there. I would know if it were, because I used to walk around there quite a lot.*" His narrative suggests that he belongs to the category of "no memories", i.e. he more readily represents the absence (of memory) than the memory of what happened there.

The other two Holocaust-related sites in Zrenjanin remain unmarked to this day. On the site where Viktor Elek was executed a housing estate was built and not a single memorial plaque reminds us of the horrific crime. The point of departure of the deportations, the River Police Port, now called "Kapetanija" by local citizens, represents a complete absence. In the period between 1970 and 1985, the Bega River was regulated whereby its length was made shorter and into three parts, thus the river, just like the Jews, was killed as well without given a chance to create a *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1996), i.e. a site of memory. Therefore, commemoration events of the deportations in August 1941 were relocated to those parts of the city where the river still flows and from where the commemorators can throw wreaths onto the river surface thus providing an opportunity to pay tribute and honor the victims and foster the norms of the culture of memory. In all societies, regardless of the political system and the degree of democracy, the attitude to the past and how we deal with it, its destruction and re-creation, are usually linked to the interests and intentions of political structures that feel entitled to create the present and to reinterpret "their" past, i.e. the past as they see it, in a manner that suits them. Walking along the streets of Zrenjanin, it becomes obvious that, from World War II until today, there was a lack of social will to create sites of memory.

Just as there are no sites of memory in Zrenjanin, there are no symbols of memory either. I explain this finding in more detail in the next subsection.

SYMBOLS OF LOCAL MEMORY

There have been religious symbols in the homes of my Jewish interviewees even though the Jews of Zrenjanin live a secular life today. In the home of all my Jewish respondents, I saw a menorah but I visited individuals who had a mezuzah or a Birkat HaBayit as well. My respondent, Lidija P. wore a Star of David necklace during the interview and she told me that this symbol has had a pivotal role in expressing her identity since her childhood. "In 1956, when I graduated from high school, my parents sent me to London to my uncle and his mother to learn English. It happened during the communist era. In Oxford Street, one of London's high streets, I saw a Magen David, Star of David necklace and I was very happy and bought it because there were no such things in Belgrade. Then my Israeli aunt came to London during her travels. We were in London at the same time and we met. My aunt, originally from Novi Sad, wrote to my parents: 'I was with L. and we had a marvelous time together and I must tell you that she wore the Star of David in the center of London' – and she showed me the necklace adding: 'as I do now'". Since then, this is an important symbol of her identity. Another interlocutor of mine, Vladimir A. told me that his father always wears the Star of David around his neck.

When I visited Judit S. and her husband, Stevan, Judit welcomed me with *hamantash* and told me that those were the local variants that are baked not only for Purim. According to her account, this pastry has a symbolic meaning for them and it serves to pass on Jewish tradition in the enculturation of the family's next generation. Ivanka F. showed me a family relic representing a meal-related symbol, i.e. a Passover Seder plate used during Pesach.

After my research in symbols of local memory, I encountered a very specific phenomenon. Namely, the safekeeping of objects found and remained intact during the demolition of the synagogue in Zrenjanin has developed into a certain cult for local Jews and some non-Jews. Before I elaborate on this statement, for the sake of deeper understanding, I would like to present the history of the synagogue in Zrenjanin.

Only thirty Jewish families lived in Zrenjanin in the 18th century. Since they lived according to well-defined religious rituals, since the foundation of the religious community, they had had such premises where they could freely practice their religion; however, it took decades to build the first synagogue in the city. Because buying land was forbidden to Jews, a special permit was needed for the construction of the building for worship. The Jewish community had bought the land in 1831, but the construction started only fifteen years later. The first synagogue was built in 1845–1847 in the then Eötvös Street, in the Jewish quarter of the city. According to some sources it was a single-story, simple-looking building almost a quadrant in shape. Although it was built as a house of worship, it followed the construction principles of a single-story house with a tripartite facade, and gable roof and with its sizes, and the repetitive rhythm of facade openings absolutely fitted in the overall view of the street. In the mid-19th century there were 500 Jews living in the city and their number gradually increased over the next decades, thus the old building proved to be too small for prayers and by that time it was also pretty dilapidated (Kojičić, 2017). That is evidenced by an article published in the *Wochenblatt* weekly from 1863: "Just like an old body losing its youthful vigor, old buildings become more and more fragile during the years. Hence the community council decided to provide a new home for its old faith."[24]. The construction of the new synagogue most likely began in 1892, when an agreement was reached between the Jewish religious council, city representatives, and county authorities. A young architect from Budapest, Lipót Baumhorn was commissioned with the design. The requirement was that the new synagogue should meet Ashkenazi ritual laws and be built in Neolog style. The building of the new synagogue started on April 1, 1894. The large-scale construction took two years and required a lot of money, hence it was supported not only by Jewish community members but, to a large extent, also by the citizens of Zrenjanin. Renowned individuals of the Jewish community of the time, such as Dr. Mavro Klein, chief rabbi, and the president of the Jewish Religious Council, Michael Schwartz, were the main contributors in building the new synagogue. Jenő Rónai, the president of the Jewish Council of the period, and several other prominent citizens also attended the opening ceremony (Kojičić, 2017). "It seems that the formation of the so-called ″Jewish Quarter″ had not been distinctly regulated, hence Jews could, depending on their financial power, build their houses in all parts of the city. It was an

[24] Gr. Bečkerek, Wochenblatt "Einweihung des Tempels", 1896. Retrived from: https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=b40moxjESGIC&pg=GBS.PA10&hl=en.

urban planning rule to build such buildings around the synagogue that provide comprehensive religious, educational and cultural life for the Jewish community therefore in most cities covered complexes were built on the building area. In Zrenjanin, these buildings were built, more or less, in two streets in the city center in different periods, but similar purpose buildings can be found in other parts of the city as well. The rabbinate was next to the synagogue, the Jewish school was across the street and later the building of Chevra Kadisha was erected in their immediate vicinity." (Kojičić, 2017).

During World War II on the orders of the German occupiers, the synagogue was systematically demolished by local citizens in 1941 searching for "Jewish gold". It was a general stereotype that Jews hid their wealth in the walls of their homes and temples. When it turned out that there was not any hidden treasure, the locals removed the building materials, furniture and other objects, and used them for their houses, as memorabilia, or recycled them. Thus, the bricks of the synagogue were used to pave yards, and build fences, moreover, there was an urban legend – also confirmed by Stevan S. and some other older respondents – that people built pigsties from the bricks of the synagogue. The synagogue organ was also thrown out on the street. The leaders of the city's Reformed Church asked the German authorities to sell them the organ and the German soldiers agreed, so it survived as one of the memory artifacts from the synagogue in Zrenjanin. According to the local Reformed Church pastor's narrative, the instrument is the property of the church. She talked about it as "o*ur organ*". When I asked her if the organ had been donated, I received evasive answers, such as that there is no need for that, and the like. Members of the Jewish Community in Zrenjanin talk about this, a seemingly another urban legend topic with mixed feelings, namely, whether the Jews have ever requested the return of the organ. The official answer of the Jewish Community in Zrenjanin is: "*No. There is no place where we could put it*." In unofficial circles, they say: "*Yes, but the Reformed Church says they have a purchase invoice of the authorities back then.*" The present pastor told me the same. However, on the website of the Reformed Church of Zrenjanin it reads: "Amid the tragic events of World War II, the congregation sought to shine as a beacon of light. There are no exact figures about the number of Jewish lives saved by Pastor Zoltán Szabó in Zrenjanin who issued baptismal letters to Jews. He not only saved lives but – at the request of our parish – also saved the organ of the Jewish community from arson, which we still keep in our church."

During my visits to the homes of my research respondents, they often showed me parts of the synagogue. Ivanka F. showed me a piece of stained glass, kept by her husband for himself and the family, which he acquired during the renovation of the stained glass and the Torah Ark in one of the rooms of the Jewish Community of Zrenjanin. As the curator of the Museum in Zrenjanin, Biljana D., told me, one can still find pieces assumed to be parts of the synagogue on the local flea market. One of the few exhibits, remains of the demolished synagogue, is a piece of pilar and the other is a fragment of the Torah scroll. She also found a piece of marble, hidden behind a cupboard in her office. Mária P., my non-Jewish interviewee, keeps an object inherited from the mother of her mother-in-law, who had worked for a Jewish family, the Schossbergers, and they gave it to her as a souvenir. This is such an example of transferring memory when the inheritance took place and is still taking place from a Jewish family to a non-Jewish family and that is how the memory of the synagogue

lives on in the memory of local families. These saved pieces of the synagogue are pivotal elements of the transmission of memory.

Walking along the streets of Zrenjanin, there are occasional symbols explicitly implying that a prosperous Jewish community used to live and work in the city once. The "insider's eyes", as my interviewee, Kristina S. put it, look at the buildings built by Jews or houses where they lived or worked, from a different perspective. "Besides the Stolpersteine laid in the pavement of the high street, the 'korzo' in 2021, nothing suggests that Jews used to live there."[25]

As stated by a local historian, Filip Krčmar, the Jewish memorial cemetery is "certainly the most impressive memory artifact of the Jews of Zrenjanin which has not been researched by historians until this day. Its turbulent past, symbolism, specific spatial concept and realization could be an interesting topic for researchers" (Krčmar et al., 2015). He states in his book that this is the only urban cemetery that was moved from one place to another. Although Jews lived in Zrenjanin as early as the 18th century, there is no exact data about the place where they buried their deaths. There is only one marked cemetery in the maps of the period and that is the Serb Orthodox one. Most of the city, including the archives, was destroyed by fire in 1807, hence all data – not only about Jews, but also about other ethnic and religious communities – were lost. The oldest headstones in the current Jewish memorial cemetery indicate that, presumably, there was a separate Jewish cemetery on a territory near the sugar mill already in 1828, then a new one was established at a new location near what used to be the sugar factory. This cemetery

was moved to the area behind the present bus station in the 1980s "when it had to be moved again to implement the interests of the Naftagas Company and the urban plans" (Krčmar et al., 2015, p. 420). Multiple occasions of desecration of graves and criminal offenses marked the four-month long relocation process. No list was made about the individuals who had been buried there and many marble headstones disappeared. The original memorial of the 1,280 victims of the Holocaust was not moved to the new cemetery, the remaining headstones were damaged, their inscriptions became unreadable, and the Start of David was put improperly on the central obelisk. The authorities of the period did not approve the presence of a rabbi during exhumation; the exhumed remains were put in a mass grave in the central part of the cemetery. Many headstones were broken during the relocation and some marble headstones were placed on the wrong pedestals. The broken parts were piled up on top of each other in the eastern part of the cemetery (Krčmar et al., 2015). This pile has been continuously shrinking and there are visible traces of hammering on the stones kept there. As my interviewee, Stevan S. told me, this suggests that "*local stonemasons ensure their supplies from these stones*". As stated by Krčmar "The fact that the local Jewish Community filed suit against those in charge of the relocation has not changed the bitter impression" (2015, p. 420). The memorial cemetery was consecrated by Cadik Danon, the first rabbi in Yugoslavia, in 1990 and Aleksandar Greber made photographic documentation of about 60 photos which is an exceptionally valuable historical collection of data. It is a noteworthy addition to the narrative about the Jewish cemetery in Zrenjanin that, according to my interviewee, Stevan S., Germans who disagreed with the Nazi ideology and thus executed during World War II were buried in

[25] Korzó – a pedestrian-only street in the center of the town.

the area designated as a memorial cemetery next to the present-day Reformed Church. During our visit to the memorial cemetery, we noticed an old wooden cross, which had been thrown into the Jewish cemetery through the fence of the Reformed cemetery. Stevan S. said: "It was not the first time one can find such crosses there. Instead of burying used crosses under the tombstone or disposing of them, they throw them over the fence, into our cemetery. And I put them back each time". He thinks it is a sort of "hidden communication" between the two religious denominations.

CONCLUSION

During my field research and writing the article, I felt constantly that it was not only the Jewish community that should remember. The local cultural memory is one-sided and non-Jewish citizens in Zrenjanin are unaware of the rich past of the city, which was also built by Jews, and they do not even "remember". Despite the existence of spatial, representative elements of memory, such as the *Stolpersteine*, memorial plaques, museum exhibitions, and publications printed by the Jewish Community, according to the President of the Jewish Community, Ljiljana P. of Zrenjanin, their community is still invisible to the general public.

In this article I have attempted to address this gap by exploring the local meanings of the Holocaust and the Jewish community of Zrenjanin in general. I have focused on the narratives of my interviewees as well as of non-Jewish citizens of the town in which they shared with me their memories related to the topic. I have also analyzed the few memorial sites related to the community in Zrenjanin, and the modes in which symbols of the local Jewry have lived on despite their absence from the everyday life of contemporary Zrenjanin.

REFERENCES

AAA – American Anthropological Association. (1998). *Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association*. Retrieved from: https://americananthro.org/wp-content/uploads/ethicscode-1.pdf [24.04.2023].

Assmann, J. (1999). *A kulturális emlékezet. Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*. Budapest: Atlantisz Könyvkiadó.

Assmann, A. (2016). *Rossz közérzet az emlékezetkultúrában – Beavatkozás* Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Alapítvány.

Assmann, A. (2018). *Oblici zaborava*. Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek.Bíró, L. (2016). *Az „egység és testvériség"– től a nemzetig. Elvárások és irányváltások a szerb történetírásban*. Retrieved from: Elte.hu, https://edit.elte.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10831/32933/34_BiroLaszlo_360-368.pdf [24.04.2023].

Boglár, L., and Papp, R. (2008). *A tükör két oldala – bevezetés kulturális antropológiába*. Budapest: Nyitott Könyvműhely.

Burke, U. P. (2005). *History and Social Theory* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fogel, N., Ed. (2013). *Holokaust u Jugoslaviji*. Belgrade: Jevrejska opština Zemun.

Gergely, A. (2010): *A kisebbségi önkép és "a Másik"*. In: Gantner B.E., Schwetier G., Varga P. (szerk.), *Kép-keret. Az identitás konstrukciói* (pp. 80–100). Budapest: Nyitott Könyvműhely.

Goldhagen, D. J. (2017). *Hitler buzgó hóhérai – Az egyszerű németek i Holokauszt*. Budapest: Atlantic Press Könyvkiadó.

Koljanin, M. (2012). *Konačno rešenje jevrejskog pitanja u Jugoslaviji (1941–1945)*. In: V. Lučić (ed). *Priručnik za učenje o holokaustu* (pp. 39–57). Novi Sad – Belgrade: Platoneum – Savez jevrejskih opština.

Kojičić, B. (2017). *Tragovi graditeljskog nasleđa Jevreja u Zrenjaninu: katalog izložbe*. Zrenjanin: Jevrejska opština Zrenjanin. Retrived from: https://www.jevrejskadigitalnabiblioteka.rs/handle/123456789/1317 [24.04.2023].

Krčmar, F., Stefanov, A., Bogović, T., and Radlovački, A. (2015). *Grobovi koji putuju: memorijalno jevrejsko groblje u Zrenjaninu*. Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opština Jugoslavije. Retrived from: https://www.jevrejskadigitalnabiblioteka.rs/handle/123456789/230 [24.04.2023].

Martinoli, A. (2012). Staro sajmište – istorijsko sećanje i virtuelno promišljanie budućnosti. In: *Tekstovi sećanja: filmski, medijski i digitalni.* „Identitet i sećanje: transkulturalni tekstovi dramskih umetnosti i medija". Ministarstvo prosvete i nauke Republike Srbije (1989–2014).

Németh, F. (2004). *A nagybecskereki sajtó története (1849–1918)*. Novi Sad (Újvidék): Forum Könyvkiadó Intézet.

Nora, P. (1996). *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past, vol. 1.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Subotić, J. (2019). *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance After Communism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Todorov, T. (2003). *Az emlékezet hasznáról és káráról*. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó.

Submitted: 10.09.2024

Reviewed: 29.11.2024

Accepted: 18.12.2024

Published online: 31.01.2025