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THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE. TRANSGENERATIONAL LOCAL MEMORY OF THE HOLOCAUST AMONG HUNGARIANS

The paper reports on the results of a non-representative focus group research aimed at exploring the local memory of the Holocaust in Hungary. The research took place between 2021 and 2024, almost 80 years after the events of 1944, at the historical moment when communicative memory is transforming into cultural memory. The sites of the research were villages, small and medium-sized towns, and the capital, precisely those scenes where the drama of the Holocaust took place in the summer of 1944. The results of the research showed that the Jews disappeared, but signs of their former presence remained. The traces of past Jewish life, however, became increasingly obscured over time in the minds of the successive generations.

Keywords: Holocaust, memory, forgetting, trauma, locality, generations, Hungary

LOCAL MEMORY OF THE HOLOCAUST IN HUNGARY

Our research into the local memory of the Hungarian Holocaust was carried out at the moment of the transformation of communicative memory into cultural memory. The research began in 2021, almost 80 years after the original events had happened. According to Jan and Aleida Assmann, this is the time frame when the transformation of communicative memory into cultural memory is unavoidable (Assmann, 2012).

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Hitler in fact fought two wars simultaneously between 1939 and 1945. The first was fought against the armies of the Allied Powers and the second was against the Jews (Dawidowicz, 1975). In 1944 it was clear he would not win against the Allied Powers, but his chances to win against the Jews were much better. By 1944 the Jewish population had been deported or decimated in all countries occupied by the troops of Nazi Germany. The only exception was Hungary, where 825,000 Jews had been largely left untouched. This does not mean that they were not discriminated against or repressed but their lives were not in immediate danger. Antisemitism was rampant in the country due the propaganda of the popular extreme right-wing political forces which had been successful in channeling the sense of social injustice of the masses against the Jews who were stereotypically seen more rich than the average non Jewish population (Karady, 1993).

The relative security of the Jewish population in Hungary vanished in a fortnight when the Wehrmacht occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944, on the direct orders of Hitler. A couple of days later, a new government was formed at the behest of the Germans which, in contrast with the previous government, was outspokenly antisemitic and ready to yield to the will of the Germans to eliminate all Jews from the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom. The design of the deportation of the Hungarian Jews was put together by the "Master" of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, the main architect of the deportation of Jews all over Europe. While Eichmann's staff was small in numbers, consisting of not more than 200 individuals, the last battlefield of Hitler's war against the Jews had become Hungary, which itself had regained territories between 1938 and 1941 which it had lost in 1920 as a result of the Trianon Peace Treaty.

The new government was eager to assist Eichmann and its staff in accomplishing the well-established German design of the genocide. The process began on 5 April by forcing all Jews to wear the yellow star on their clothes, followed by numerous restrictions including confining them to local ghettoes prior to their deportation, mainly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The whole process was carried out with unbelievable speed and precision. The first transports began leaving Hungary on 14 May and, by 9 July, 434,351 Jews had been deported from all over Hungary except the capital. The deported were mainly children, women and old men scattered throughout the enlarged territory of the country. While few settlements were not inhabited by Jews, the distribution of the Jewish population was rather unequal and favored the cities where the ghettoes were established. The adult men were drafted into the army as unarmed labor servicemen. The head of state, Miklós Horthy, had remained in his post and prompted by Roosevelt, the Swedish King, and the Pope, halted the deportation on 6 July sparing the lives of most of the Jews living in Budapest. With the fall of Horthy on 15th October the persecution and deportations resumed, but the majority of the Jews living in Budapest survived (Braham, 2016).

For a long time, the communicative memory of the Holocaust in Hungary was characterized by silence and the signs of the existence of the Jews who had been deported from the towns and villages were muted. Nobody was willing to speak about the empty ruined synagogues, the decaying cemeteries, the houses, shops, factories and public buildings they had built, all of which had been transferred to new owners.

The question is, however, whether the physical signs of the Holocaust are sufficient to open up the local history and if they are capable of keeping alive the memory of the tragic events amongst people who are increasingly distanced in time from the original horrific events.

Without the awareness of the horror of the Holocaust, the transformation of communicative memory will likely result in a ritualized cultural memory and the painful cognitive dissonance stemming from the dramatic events will be lost. The antidote to repression, relativization, trivialization, responsibility shifting, lack of guilt, or to the inability to mourn is a dialogical, discursive cultural memory, the revival and maintenance of which is a task that requires constant social pedagogical effort (Mitcherlich and Mitcherlich, 1968). To accomplish this, the intergenerational exploration and exposure of local memory patterns of the Holocaust, together with the creation of online and offline spaces for dialogue, is required.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the patterns of local memory, we launched a series of focus group studies in the autumn of 2021. The research was conducted among members of three age groups in villages, in small and medium towns and in the capital (see Note). In each settlement, before the respondents were questioned, a cultural anthropological field study was carried out, aimed at exploring the social texture of the site with a specific attention to the local remnants of Jewish life (see the list of settlements in Appendix 2).

There were three reasons why we decided not to create a representative sample of the settlements concerned. The first reason came from the difference between the present size of the country and the enlarged size of the country during the events of the spring and early summer of 1944. The second reason is connected with the chilling similarity of the script of the process in every settlement, which began with forcing the Jews to wear the yellow star on their clothes in public places followed by severe restrictions of everyday life, confiscation of movable and immovable property, and ending with moving into the nearby ghetto and from there being transported to Auschwitz in cattle wagons, each packed with 80–100 persons. Moreover, the cast was also the same in every settlement, with perpetrators, victims, beneficiaries of robberies and looting, passive bystanders and rescuers performing the same roles in the local drama of the deportation everywhere. The third reason stemmed from the difficulty of recruiting respondents living in the individual spots. Proceeding in the research, we had to realize that the local communicative memory of the Holocaust was blurred in every settlement by distrust, fear, anxiety, and a repressed sense of guilt. Consequently, those who voluntarily agreed to participate and came to the interview were members of a self-selected group who were not deterred by the dark shadows of the memory of the deported Jews who were their neighbors, acquaintances, and business partners. Conspicuously enough, with one exception, no descendants of the former perpetrators or beneficiaries of looting showed up.

Instead of conducting personal in-depth interviews we decided to apply the focus group method that allows the study of responses in a more natural conversational mode in contrast with the one-to-one encounter between the interviewer and the respondent. Focus groups are not only a means of marketing research but this qualitative research method can be used in other domains of social research as well (Morgan, 1996; Blood et al., 2001).

All materials related to the research are available for the public (see Appendix 3).

The questions addressed to the members of the groups were formulated in six thematic blocks (Appendix 2).

RESULTS

VILLAGES

Of the many available options, we first chose Ricse in northern Hungary. The famous Hollywood tycoon, Adolf Zukor, was born in Ricse. Orphaned at an early age, he completed 4 civic classes in Mátészalka, then became a grocer's apprentice in a nearby village. At the age of 15 he emigrated to America, where his talent, diligence, and exceptional sensitivity to new things led to a hugely successful film career after he founded the Paramount Pictures film production company. He did not forget Ricse, where the Juhász Fountain which he donated still stands in the village square.

Although there is still a Holocaust survivor in the village, we were unable to reach this person directly. We did find one young interviewee, but he knew virtually nothing about either Zukor or the Jews.

No one from the young and middle generation was willing to answer but among the elderly group we found two men who were keen to do so. Both of them had vivid memories of the Jews of Ricse and knew Adolf Zukor, after whom the village community center is named. Zukor's birthplace will soon house a museum. These elderly villagers also knew the houses of the Jews who had once lived in the village, and were able to tell us where the synagogue was, which later became a savings bank. They also know the fenced, closed Jewish cemetery. In their childhood memories, they remembered local Jews who had been mentioned by their grandparents. However, communication barriers were strong, and fear, trauma and guilt seem to be dominant in the interviews.

Unconscious antisemitic clichés and stereotypes (solidarity, wealth) emerged in the responses while responsibility for the Holocaust was attributed to Hitler and the Germans. The memories are colored by resentment towards the period's non-Jewish population. The memories of neighbors looking for gold in the houses of deported Jews are mixed with the memory of Jews helping those in material need.

The village setting brought the memories of the elderly participants closer together in space and volume, but they were buried by silence, making the intergenerational transmission of memories impossible. Not surprisingly, the same pattern of remembrance was found in Körösladány, far away from Ricse, in Békés county.

SMALL TOWNS

As we have stated above, during the research the process of finding interview subjects was difficult. Half of the potential interviewees contacted by our helpers in Kőszeg and Szeghalom declined the invitation. Several of them asked the questions "who", "why" and "for what" they wanted to "use" the interviews. Others expressed their confusion as to "why" we were dealing with "Jews again". Our interviews represent the thoughts about the Jews and the local Holocaust of those who, despite the fear, anxiety and hidden sense of guilt, were willing to participate in the discourse of collective local remembrance.

ELDERLY PEOPLE

The interviewees gave different definitions of Jewishness. One of them clearly defined Jewishness as a religion, stating that if a person who identified himself as Jewish was not religious, he would not call him a Jew.

Several people mentioned the categories "people", "nationality", "nation". The wording of one of them ('in the Far East, the Jews were constantly at war for survival') also refers to the vagueness of the knowledge related to the Jews. Another interviewee considered it a characteristic of the "Jewish people" that "they were not assimilated…even after traumas and shocks, the Jewish people's consciousness was able to survive". Another respondent, responding to the utterances of his peer members in the group, defined Judaism as a "chosen people", which in his opinion meant that the Jews were a "leading group" and "this is what the consciousness of being chosen means".

From the interview passages quoted, we can see that the definition of Jewishness is surrounded by uncertainty on the part of the people interviewed. This is coupled with the vagueness of knowledge about Jewish culture and history, as well as the stereotypes (not necessarily negative and not perceived as offensive by our interviewees, but existing) of the "sense of belonging together" and "leading ethnic group". In relation to the historical persecution of Jews and anti-Semitism, several respondents mentioned the religious aspects of the persecution of Jews ('god-killing' stigma, Easter processions turning into pogroms). The " cohesive power of being Jewish" was also highlighted again.

In this context, this stereotype was referred to as the cause of the persecution of Jews. In a related context, one of our respondents explained that, unfortunately, "it pays to harm a minority", especially when a minority is "prominent" in economic and intellectual life, as was the case with the Jewish community. This and the resulting 'envy' were mentioned by several people.

The latter narrative is a fascinating illustration of the unreflected presence of the stereotype of the Jewish minority as a 'privileged minority' in economic and intellectual life, even among those who, like our interlocutors, see discrimination against Jews as a decidedly negative phenomenon.

In relation to local signs of memory, all the respondents agreed that in the settlement where they live as one of them put it, "of course there are traces". Accordingly, our interlocutors were familiar with the built monuments visible in the city (most of them in Kőszeg mentioned the synagogue and the Jewish cemetery), but they also stressed that the city had so far failed to make the mass graves on the outskirts of the city, which are marked with a memorial sign, more visible and public. They believe it would be important to commemorate the victims with a memorial park. One interviewee added that the stumbling stones should also be made more visible and the Jewish cemetery should be kept in a tidier condition. In Szeghalom, no traces of Jewish life remained but the interviewees mentioned a "Jewish tree" that according to them had grown where the synagogue had stood in 1944. The synagogue was demolished but the tree was certainly a fake sign since the synagogue was in fact built in another place in the town.

For the older generation we interviewed, the memory of the deportations is clearly linked to personal, communication memory. However, these personal memories are not the direct

recollections of the witnesses. By "personal memory" our interviewees meant stories they had heard from Jewish acquaintances, friends and colleagues. One of the interviewees stated that while the rightwing Arrow Cross party members were responsible for the deportations, the Kőszeg bourgeoisie "stayed away from these things". The possibility of resistance and help to Jews was dismissed, also by the interviewee quoted, the "the above-mentioned citizens, who would have been 'shot in the head if they had helped''. What emerges from this section of the interview, therefore, is that while our interviewees are empathetic with the victims of the Holocaust (and even have more personal, detailed knowledge of the events through their acquaintances), the more general social patterns of forgetting and avoidance are equally dominant in their narratives.

In relation to the importance of Holocaust remembrance, the respondents agreed that it should be remembered because, as one of them put it, "it should not be taken off the agenda because it could happen today". One of them referred to the importance of making local memorial spaces more visible and the importance of building a memorial park on the site of mass graves. Some, however, argued that remembrance should not be "one-sided", stressing the need to remember "reality". In this fragment of an interview, we can observe a mild yet clear opposition to the idea that the narrative of Jewishness in memory can be over-represented in relation to 'reality'. However, this was only the comment of one of the participants, the other interviewees did not speak about this, and one of them even stressed that the events of the Holocaust must be conveyed in an experiential way so that the commemorators can also experience the horrors of the Holocaust.

MIDDLE-AGED PEOPLE

In this focus group, the categories "religion", "origin" and "chosen people" are also mentioned as definitions of Jewishness. One of them refers to the aspect of Jewishness as an identity ascribed by the majority. Here he also mentions the example of the Holocaust as a tragic consequence of this ascribed identity.

There are two comments in this interview that are different from those mentioned above. One interviewee sees that "lately, in certain circles, it has become fashionable" to be Jewish and believes that there are people who, although not Jewish, "would like to become Jewish."

In another interview extract, we again encounter a narrative about Jewishness that is not intended to be malicious but is used without reflection. According to this narrative, the person our interviewee sees as Jewish is "a very good merchant". Accordingly, when he sees that "someone is very keen to sell his goods" he thinks that "he has Jewish ancestry". He adds, however, that he does not mean this "in a negative way at all" but "in a positive way".

The reference to 'certain circles' and the stereotype of the 'good trader' associated with Jewish ancestry were not coupled with overt anti-Semitic statements in the narratives of our interviewees. This again (as we have seen in the case of the older generation in Kőszeg) points to the uncritical emergence of general antisemitic narratives among our interviewees. These narratives can therefore be accepted and used by those who otherwise reject all forms of antisemitism.

Likewise, the stereotypes that might be interpreted as antisemitic in other contexts are also thought-provoking in the context of the reasons for persecution: ''they are good with money'', ''they are a closed, secretive group'', ''I blame them too for being isolated'', ''they

do not accept Christ'', ''they provoke antisemitism, which they would not if they were a little more integrated''.

However, the interviewees were unanimous in their condemnation of the persecution of Jews. However, they also cited as reasons for the persecution perceptions linked to the prejudices and stereotypes cited above, such as "envy" and "fear" of majority societies, stemming from "wealth", "closed-mindedness", "rejection of full integration" and "fear". In this light, we again encounter stereotypes in cultural patterns in this section of the interview.

Members of the focus group listed traces of Jewish memory in Kőszeg, but several of them also emphasized that most of the residents and even the visiting Jews are not aware of them.

In the view of one of them, this is also a failure on the part of the Jews, who should find the financial means to do so. Another interviewee, however, believes that these memorials should not be identified as Jewish, as neither evangelical nor Catholic memorials are specified, either. Therefore, like the latter, the Jewish monuments should be called "Hungarian monuments in Kőszeg".

Furthermore, several participants stressed the need to publicize the intangible traces of local memory, especially the memory of non-Jews who hid Jews during the Holocaust.

We can also see from these narratives that the emphasis on the 'otherness' of Jewishness is more intense in this generation, with the critical overtone that this 'otherness' is a result of the rejection of assimilation by Jews into 'Hungarianness'.

The narratives about the causes of the deportations are also complex. On the one hand, the respondents are unanimous in their condemnation of the horrors of the Holocaust. The reasons, according to them, were ''well-functioning propaganda'', ''sheepishness'', ''the German aggression'' and ''the desire for profit from Jewish wealth''. The latter is also highlighted by one of them as a direct cause of the deportations from Kőszeg.

On the other hand, the shifting of collective responsibility also appears in several narratives. According to this narrative, the deportations were carried out by a ''despicable small group''. The majority did not help the Jews because they were ''afraid'' and, moreover, no one knew what was happening, since ''the Jews had also reported their own addresses'', since even they were unaware of what was happening. In a related context, one interviewee describes the ''public discourse'' of the time with the help of a personal memory recounted by her grandmother, that non-Jews believed that Jews were ''finally were taken to work''. In this way, our interviewee tried to illustrate that the people of Kőszeg did not know ''what the end of the deportations would be''. However, the brutality of the statement "finally they were taken to work" was absolutely not reflected, not even noticed.

In the light of the examples cited, it can be concluded that the group's memory narratives of the deportations also carry with them a rejection of local and general social responsibility.

The respondents unanimously agreed that we should not forget the Holocaust.

YOUNG PEOPLE

What was new in these groups is that two of the respondents mentioned personal contacts with Jews. One respondent mentions that his Jewish acquaintance has "no shame" about being Jewish. Another referred to his Jewish acquaintance as one whose "parents are Jewish rather than him." Other group members did not know Jewish people personally. We found,

that even among people having Jews on their social network there is a prevailing sense of uncertainty, distance and stereotypes about attitudes towards Jews.

At the same time, the fact that young respondents mentioned the responsibility of the Hungarian local authorities and the gendarmerie in the deportations is indicative of the more reflexive, courageous memory narratives of young people. They were equally sharp in their criticism of the passive participation of the non-Jewish population in the Holocaust. In the words of one of them: 'It happened openly and in full view of everyone, and no one did anything'. In connection with this, they see that it is precisely because of this passivity that "there is collective feeling of guilt".

The focus group participants agreed on the need to remember. They stressed the need for more "memory care", i.e. for everyone to experience the events of the Holocaust at least once as a defining experience. Two of the group would also make a visit to a concentration camp compulsory in all European schools, including Hungary.

THE CAPITAL CITY: BUDAPEST

A special feature of the Budapest interviews was that Jewish and non-Jewish interviewees participated in the focus groups together.

ELDERLY PEOPLE

Among the elderly Budapest residents questioned, the topics of Judaism, the Holocaust and antisemitism were of great interest. Participants included survivors, descendants of survivors and non-Jews of Christian faith. There were a mixture of men and women.

The answers to the question "who are the Jews?" highlighted the difficulty and complexity of defining the category itself. Some focused on religious practice, others on birth, culture and behavior. The aspect of external identification was raised, which already included stigmatization and prejudicial discrimination. There was also an emphasis on a narrative based on self-classification.

The next question concerned the causes of what Wistrich called the 'longest hatred' phenomenon (Wistrich, 1991). One respondent, citing the example of Polish Jewry, drew attention to the indispensable role played by Jews in the economy and the ressentiment amongst non-Jews as a result of the role that Jews played. The envy felt by the majority at the success of the Jews, the love of knowledge, the peculiarity of entrepreneurship and risk-taking, came up in most responses. Others, non-Jews, emphasized the 'victim competition', claiming a share in the ranks of victims, alongside Jews, those sent to the gulag, Gypsies, Swabians, homosexuals. Some recalled their childhood, when they were ostracized. Some explained the millennia of Jewish persecution by factors of otherness, alienation and difference.

As in the other groups here we had also a separate question related to the traces of the Jews' past and current presence, which are physically perceptible but carry meanings beyond their physical existence. Respondents mentioned the large number of buildings built by Jewish architects, the synagogues that were in operation and reopened, the stumbling blocks commemorating those killed and deported in 1944, the neighborhoods that were once the site of ghettos, and the sites of contemporary Jewish cultural life.

The conversation really heated up when the events of 1944 were recalled. The Jewish participants, partly from personal memories and partly from what they had heard from their parents and grandparents, listed the tragic events of 1944, which began with the German invasion on 19 March 1944 and continued with the humiliating deprivation of rights. Everyone was aware that the Jews living in the immediate area of the capital were not deported as cruelly and systematically as the Jews in the countryside. The conversation was made vivid by personal and harrowing memories of being moved to separate houses, of the massacres following the takeover of power by the Arrow Cross government on October 15, and the remaining Jewry of Budapest being forced into the two ghettos. Respondents also remembered the helpers who brought food to the ghettos, carried messages, and hid children. They remembered the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg particularly warmly, who was present wherever help was needed and possible.

Everyone was alerted by the question in which we asked from whom, when and where the respondents learned about what happened in 1944, who, when and from whom learned that they were Jewish. The answers highlighted silence, taboo, late oral communication and in some cases surviving written (diary) forms. Denial, silence, silencing, and late, gate-crashing communications were dominant for both Jewish and non-Jewish respondents, in which paradoxically enough silence was also considered as communication.

At the end of the discussion, the dilemmas of forgetting, remembering, forgiving, and communicating the past to future generations were discussed by the group members. They agreed that what was discussed is now history for young people, and that they can only learn from it if the confrontation is experiential and cathartic. What happened must not be forgotten, because inter-group hatred is still a living force, the antidotes to which are education, discovery, knowledge, tolerance and individual freedom.

MIDDLE-AGED PEOPLE

Most of our middle-aged Budapest respondents believed that anyone who identifies themselves as Jewish is Jewish. One interviewee, however, believed that being Jewish "depends on who is asking."

The historical causes of persecution and antisemitism are identified by the majority of group members as a lack of knowledge about Judaism and the resulting stereotypes, prejudices and scapegoating. Anti-Judaism is also mentioned in this group as a means of " enraging the masses".

As in other groups, the unreflective use of stereotypes associated with Judaism ("rich", "educated", "more powerful", "above the average") and the "envy" associated with these stereotypes as a cause of antisemitism and historical persecution. The emergence of these stereotypes is also interesting because they were mentioned by Jewish and non-Jewish respondents, which indicates the general social presence of stereotypes and prejudices related to Jewishness.

Some of our interviewees believe that the signs of Jewish memory are "everywhere, in the stones, in the synagogues", "there is no other place in the world with so many Holocaust memorials".

Other respondents also agreed on the visibility of Jewish built heritage and signs of Holocaust remembrance (monuments, stumbling blocks) in Budapest.

Thus, the signs of local Holocaust remembrance and the presence of Jewish culture in Budapest are strongly represented for those who are actively involved in local Jewish cultural life, while for others these signs are not visible with such intensity.

As with the previous topics, the narratives related to the deportations also produced several different interpretations during the focus group interview.

Several of our respondents emphasized the tragedy of the deportations, which, as one of them put it, "people cannot comprehend with common sense". It was also repeatedly mentioned that even immediately before the deportations, the Jews in Hungary were not aware that such a terrible thing could happen to them as Hungarians. All of the interviewees who mentioned the latter idea referred to their own Jewish family history as a reference in their memories.

In relation to the deportations, some of the focus group members also shared other fascinating family and personal memories. In these narratives, the Holocaust and its aftermath become personal family events. The focus group interviews contributed to a deeper understanding of intergenerational memories. of the Holocaust, as can be illustrated through the following interview sample:

> My grandmother has stories, the one who was born in '23. She's the only one I know on my mother's side. She died in '99. So I have a personal connection to that. And she would always tell me about how the soldiers came and then she would pretend to be such a nutter, working and all that, and then she would cook like that for the Germans and the Arrow Cross and the Russians later on. And that's how the story went, and he always joked about it. It stuck with me from when we were kids, the things she used to gibber and things like that. And it's a really nice story… And then in 2003 we received a letter from the German state saying that they had managed to identify her. And I don't remember which camp, but one of the camps near Dachau, that she enjoyed hospitality there… In our family it happened like that, that there is a story, and then when the German state writes that they want to give my mother a lump sum of compensation because they identified my grandmother and they succeeded and everything is correct, and then the circle is closed…

The contents of the interviews show the coexistence of the will to forget and the compulsion to remember, illustrating the consequences of personal coping mechanisms in trauma-induced forgetting.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Members of the focus group of young people in Budapest also mention culture and religion as definitions of Jewishness. To the latter, one of them added that Judaism is more complex than Christianity because, in addition to religious affiliation, origin is also a criterion for belonging to Judaism. Several of them mention, like members of the middle-aged generation, that "a Jew is someone who claims to be Jewish".

Two referred to the fact that Jews are not different from others. One said that "there is no real distinction any more" between Jews and non-Jews. The mention of Jewish otherness as an anachronistic characteristic only emerged in this group.

Another respondent thought-provokingly, referred to the socially charged meaning of the word ''Jew'': ''there is something hurtful about uttering it''. Here, our interviewee

explained that, even as a non-Jew, he had experienced manifestations of antisemitism since childhood. For this reason, he feels that the word ‘‘Jew’’, when uttered, is in itself ‘‘hurtful’’, like a ‘‘swear word’’ for him.

Many of the respondents see the causes of hatred and antisemitism towards Jews, as in the other focus groups, in human evil, scapegoating and anti-Judaism. In the case of one interviewee, we encountered the stereotype that Jews were “more resourceful in adapting and that this was inherited”. It is thought-provoking that this interview fragment comes from someone who found the word ‘‘Jew’’ offensive. Antisemitism in his environment seems to influence his thinking even when he is denouncing it.

Another interviewee also voiced a stereotype (“a people for their own sake”) while also reflecting on this. In his view, the social isolation of Jews and the adaptation strategies that go hand in hand came about as a consequence of the persecution and discrimination suffered over the past centuries.

Most of the group members listed in detail the signs of Jewish culture and Holocaust remembrance in Budapest. In addition to synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, memorials and stumbling blocks, the whole of Újlipótváros and the area around Kazinczy Street were also mentioned. The latter was even described by one of our interviewees as “little Tel Aviv” and “a microcosm of Jewish heritage”.

However, some critical views emerged that there are still significant gaps in the visibility of commemorative signs. The “party quarters” in the seventh district were mentioned by several people as the site of the old ghetto. One of the respondents noted that the “slum” had some star-shaped houses with “no memory”. Another interviewee said it was a “disgrace” that crowds of people are partying uncontrollably in this area, and that no one thinks about, or even knows, what happened there a few decades ago. Related to this, one of our interviewees suggested that the boundaries of the former ghetto should be marked and the information about it should be used to preserve the memory of the neighborhood and the Holocaust.

The group also voiced a range of opinions and narratives about the deportations.

Several interviewees were uncertain in terms of their knowledge of what happened. The explanation of one of them is instructive: “I had a history teacher with a T-shirt of Great Hungary, it was not much talked about”. One of our interviewees from the group added to the sentence quoted above, in connection with the knowledge also related to the deportations, that the problem in her opinion is that her generation no longer has any direct family knowledge of the Holocaust.

The members of the focus group agreed on the importance of remembering the Holocaust, while some comments provoked lively discussion and reflections among the interviewees, which recurred throughout the discussion. Namely, one interviewee asked whether, for those for whom Holocaust remembrance is “not as important”, the responsibility to remember is “not an imposition”. Two other interviewees also mentioned the ‘imposition’ of remembrance on schoolchildren and the need for remembrance to focus on ‘facts’ only. The majority of the group emphatically disagreed with these views, since, as one of them put it, “if there is silence, the horror of the period can happen again”.

SUMMARY

Memory is a fundamental condition of human individual and collective existence. It is through memory that time makes sense. Forgetting, repressing, distorting, arbitrarily rewriting what happened in the past makes people vulnerable and unable to shape the present and the future.

Hungarian society is plagued by a variety of collective amnesias, and this research has focused on one with the most serious consequences: memory loss and distortion. We recruited the participants through personal contacts, many of whom, however, did not agree to take part in the research which we filmed.

From the group interviews, extremely fascinating family and personal memory narratives emerged, often with cathartic power. The trans-local and trans-generational perspective chosen proved to be very productive. In Kőszeg, for example, we found that uncertainty, distance and the existence of the same stereotypes were prevalent in attitudes towards Jewishness in all three generations, while in Budapest, transgenerational memories revealed more complex patterns/heterogeneous narratives compared to other sites.

The answers to the question "who is a Jew?" given by those with a Jewish identity revealed semantic heterogeneity and epistemological uncertainty. In contrast, respondents whose identity was outside the semantic field of the name "Jew" were driven to essentialist and homogenous definitions of the term, even including non-malicious but unreflective and uncritical displays of antisemitic narratives.

Responses to questions exploring the reasons for the persecution of Jews showed that classical antisemitic narratives are also present in those with a Jewish identity, and that among non-Jews these narratives are accepted even by those who otherwise reject all forms of antisemitism. The field of interpretation and explanation of the Holocaust in Hungary in 1944, regardless of their involvement, generation or locality, evoked associations in all participants of incomprehension, inexplicability, and the chaotic organization of the world, with Evil as the ultimate organizing principle.

Local remembrance of the Holocaust is not possible without remembering the actual presence of Jews in the place. Complete forgetting, not knowing, was relatively rare. The majority of respondents, of all ages and in all types of places, could recall both intentional and non-intentional signs of the deportation, persecution and of Jewish life in the place in the period before. However, the mentions were typically unreflective, simply describing the memory of the Jews who had disappeared. From the interviews, we can conclude that the ghettoized and ritualized memory of the Jews who once lived and were exterminated and expelled is animated by their abstract, elusive, mysterious absence, which is explained by the lack of discourse that revives the shared past of Jews and non-Jews in the place. Only in rural areas is there a memory frozen in the buildings once built by Jews; in small towns, in the capital, in the squares and busy streets, there are still the well-maintained or poorly maintained department stores, hotels and apartment blocks, but no one knows who built them, who worked and lived in them, before the former builders were eliminated. In the absence of signs to remind them, those who live today do not know who set the stage upon which they now live.

The absence of discourse is not only a feature of the public communication, but also of the communication within families and between generations. The most dramatic testimonies obtained during the research brought to the surface the silencing and tabooing of the trauma of the Holocaust and the further traumatization that inevitably occurs when the taboo is broken, yet with healing effects.

As a cathartic climax at the end of the discussions, the participants were confronted with the dilemma of forgetting vs. remembering, to which the majority of respondents clearly responded that the past cannot be erased, however painful it was, it must be filled with life in order to never return in its reality.

The focus group interviews recorded by video proved to be an excellent opportunity to address future generations, to confront the collective social responsibility for the Holocaust, which one of our interviewees expressed as "happening openly and in front of everyone and no one did anything".

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APPENDIX 1

LIST OF SETTLEMENTS

Villages
Ricse, Körösladány

Small towns
Kőszeg, Szeghalom

Medium size cities
Miskolc
Nagyvárad (Oradea)

Capital
Budapest

APPENDIX 2

Questions of the focus group interviews

1. Who are the Jews?
   – Who are the Jews?
   – Do you have any personal experiences related to Judaism?
2. Reasons for anti-Jewishness, antisemitism:
   – Why have Jews in the Western world been singled out and persecuted from ancient times to the present?
3. Local memory:
   – What happened in 1944?
   – How was the deportation carried out?
   – Where was the ghetto?
   – Who and what did they do to the deportees?
   – Were any of them helped or hidden?
   – Where were the deportees taken?
   – Did any of the deportees return to the settlement?
4. Culture of remembrance – Intergenerational communication:
   – Did grandparents or parents talk about the deportation?
   – Did they talk/discuss the Holocaust or the local deportations with others?
   – What and how they learned about the Holocaust and local deportations in school history lessons?

5. The spaces of memory:
   - Are there Jews living in the settlement today?
   - Is there a synagogue or Jewish cemetery in the settlement?
   - Are there stumbling stones, street names, memorials commemorating the Holocaust?
   - Are there Holocaust commemorations?
6. Understanding, remembering, forgetting:
   - Why did what happened come to pass?
   - Should the Holocaust and the deportations be remembered?

APPENDIX 3

The materials of the audiovisual documentation of the research can be accessed at: www. holocaust memory.org