Editors' Introduction

The presented collective monograph focuses on the contemporary circumstances of Jewish life, primarily in Central Europe. The book is divided into four thematic sections and an appendix: ***Section I*** *Contextualizing Jewish Life in the Midst of the "Old Continent,"* ***Section II*** *Breaks, Changes, and Continuities in Austria and Hungary,* ***Section III*** *Jewish Past and Present in the Czech Republic, and* ***Section IV*** *An Ongoing Struggle with Judeophobia*. The ***Appendix*** carries the title *Memories, reflections, and Prospects*.

What does it signify to be a Jew in the twenty-first century? Academic discussions revolving around this question have comprised a wide range of controversial points of view. Nevertheless, there is one rather rare consensus, expressed by many, referring to massive consequences of the twentieth century historical legacies – the burden which has been borne by both Jews and non-Jews on the old continent.

Zygmunt Bauman famously defined the Jews as "the pioneers of the postmodern condition,"[1] whose most noticeable contribution to European culture was exposing all the contradictoriness and ambiguities that currently shape the lives of all Europeans.[2] The Jewish diaspora is often perceived as archetypal, and the Jews are considered in many aspects as the perennial minority. At the same time, Jews have undoubtedly had a great share in forming the face of Europe as it is today. This unique Jewish experience of having an ambiguous position of insider and outsider may provide valuable views on contemporary reality and the identity crisis in Europe. Thus, the main common characteristic of European Jewish life should comprise an intense confrontation with the heritage of the Holocaust and unrelenting antisemitism on the one hand, and on the other hand, as a seeming paradox, forceful acknowledgement and appreciation of traditional Jewish learning and culture by a growing number of non-Jewish Europeans.

It is needless to emphasise that a common approach to European Jewish existence from the second half of the twentieth century has been radically shaped by the Holocaust. The world-famous British historian and European studies theorist Tony Judt quoted in his book *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* Heinrich Heine, who once stated that "For Jews (...) baptism is their 'European entry

1 Zygmunt Bauman, *Jews and Other Europeans, Old and New* (Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2008), 1.
2 Ibid.

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ticket'".[3] Almost two centuries later, Judt responded to Heine that our European entry ticket is Holocaust recognition: "Today the pertinent European reference is not baptism. It is extermination."[4]

Presently, when the term of "Holocaust fatigue" broadly resonates in the western world, threatening hard-won Holocaust awareness and ethical commitment, when the number of Shoah survivors and witnesses is constantly decreasing, and European Jews are again encountering antisemitism on a daily basis, the fundamental question emerges once more on whether Europe will remain the "paragon of the international virtues"[5] and whether the twenty-first century can still, after all, "belong to Europe,"[6] as Judt hesitantly supposed.

Prevailing trends, however, expose a much less positive image. As a result of the aforementioned European identity crisis, there is the infiltration of xenophobia and intolerance towards diversity into a public discourse where it gradually turns into a widely accepted norm.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Jews across Europe have begun questioning again whether it would improve their living conditions if they would entirely assimilate into the majority society. The public wearing of religious symbols like the kippah or David's star represents a security threat in most of the European countries. In some countries, the parents of Jewish children are confronted with the unsolvable dilemma of whether they should enroll their children in an ordinary school where they often become the target of bullying, or into a Jewish school where they could become victims of a terrorist attack. Emigration, usually to Israel or the U.S., an option chosen by an increasing number of European Jews, is understandably, due to many causes, not an easy decision. Antisemitism is, therefore, still a highly relevant factor in the lives of European Jews. Even though the perpetrators of antisemitism differ between individual countries, the consequences generally lower the quality of life of Jewish communities and are, in the upshot, relatively interchangeable.

A particular challenge of the last decade is the rise of right-wing populism and nativism, which are not limited to the borderline parts of the political spectrum, but shown off in everyday speeches of political leaders with high electoral credit. This trend by itself is alarming for the Jewish minority as such. Many identify a dangerous parallel between this development and European events in the 1930s.

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3 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (Penguin Books, 2006), 803.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 799.
6 Ibid., 800.

Jews, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, moreover cope with the curious paradox where some local governmental provisions or the public statements of political elites appear bluntly antisemitic, but simultaneously on the level of international relations have indisputably fervent and firm ties to Israel. With the exception of undeniable pragmatism not burdened by moral premises, these relatively contradictory stances could originate from the ambiguous image that Israel represents for the populist governments. On the one hand, Israel is acknowledged as a welcomed and successful ally in the declared nativist battle for European or Western values that are allegedly threatened by the influx of refugees and immigrants. On the other hand, Israel's mere existence inevitably confronts Europe's never thoroughly confessed and processed guilt for the Holocaust and post-war events.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, these burdensome topics began slowly opening in post-communist countries, and everything attested that there is the will to gradually come to terms with this past. Nonetheless, the last decade persuasively showed that the national identities of single countries of the Central and Eastern bloc are not consistent enough so they can, speaking in Jungian terms, integrate their shadow in the form of accepting their participation in the Holocaust and subsequent anti-Jewish violence. These deep-rooted issues have assured potential to be also discussed within the context of western European countries – however, such a debate would be beyond the main scope of the presented book.

Nevertheless, not every aspect of contemporary Jewish life across Europe is overshadowed by old-new antisemitism and new uncertainties. For instance, the recent developments in Germany intensified by the Russian speaking Jewish influx from the successor states of the former Soviet Union are positively promising. Irrespective of frequent cultural dissonances and conflicts, the local Jewish communities in Germany have enlarged, stabilised, and made up the leeway for a new Jewish pluralism. Also, the Jewish communities and organisations in Hungary reflect persisting dynamics, though only a distinct percentage of Hungarian Jews is organised and "visible." Against this background, it cannot be omitted that even less plentiful numbers of Jews in Poland and the Czech Republic are highly committed and actively working on communal cohesion and continuity. Advanced discussions on Jewish identity and self-conception have also emerged in Austria and other countries of Central Europe. While searching for their own path and *modus vivendi*, it is of great importance for the Jewish communities to contextualize their past, present, and future not exclusively in terms of demography, human geography, and geopolitics, but also in an attempt to decipher a profound sense of belonging – intensely flourishing in Central Europe. On this

very point, a seemingly fundamental question then arises, i. e. what is today perceived as the authentic "Central Europe"?

In ***Section I*** under the title *Contextualizing Jewish Life in the Midst of the "Old Continent"*, **Raphael Vago** touches on the quest of the traditional and also the present-day "real" Central Europe and offers a whole spectrum of geographical, cultural, and political answers provided by writers and intellectuals like Milan Kundera, Alan Palmer, Jacques Rupnik, György Konrád, Anita Shapira, Róbert Kiss-Szemán, and others. The various and distinct, partly contradictory, statements manifest that an "authentic Central Europe" has not yet been materialized, not even in hieratic and deathless forms, although it is often recalled and reverted for new identity drafts, by non-Jews and Jews as well.

Sergio DellaPergola offers a profound overview of the prevailing demographic situation of the Jews in Europe, which is marked by longstanding trends of assimilation, overage, and seclusion. Despite the considerable number of Eastern European Jews who decided for a new beginning in Western Europe after World War II and also at the end of the Cold War, Jewish community life is seriously threatened in the long run. Nonetheless, unexpected trends and developments are not obviated. One of them might be a recently growing birth rate in Jewish families in Great Britain, which contradicts the general negative life balance in European Jewry.

Julius H. Schoeps refers to the high degree of motivation among many Central European Jews for cultural and organisational self-assertion, and in a similar way for re-orientation within the "Jewish scene." Schoeps states that "an authentic Jewish culture, however, ceased to exist in Europe." At the same time, he reflects on the diverse ways of identity searching, especially among the younger generations. As an appearing element of modern Jewish identity, primarily in the middle of Europe, he notices a resilient "involvement in public matters, commitment to civil society, and most of all, exercising criticism wherever freedom and human rights are under attack."

Besides an ongoing debate to what extent authentic, traditional Jewish culture still is – or again is – present in post-cold-War Central Europe, it is an incontrovertible fact that genuineness and persistence of a community journey can hardly be disputed. Central European Jews have indeed undergone a large number of breaks, transformations, and sometimes surprising continuities.

Section II, entitled *Breaks, Changes, and Continuities in Austria and Hungary*, opens with **Vladimir Ze'ev Khanin**, who describes the new situation of Jewish communities in Austria since the end of the Cold War. The fall of the "Iron Curtain" enabled massive Jewish emigration from Eastern to Western Europe accompanied by peculiar intercultural encounters. Besides the small group of originally German-speaking Jews, "Russians," "Sephardi" and "Israelis" are instant-

ly guaranteeing the dynamics and a demographic continuity. Khanin further recounts a permanent identity search among the respective Jewish subgroups in today's Austria.

Based on recent empirical data, **Ildikó Barna** and **András Kovács** are suggesting that Jewish religious and cultural revival has continued, to some degree, within the Hungarian Jewish community for ca. 20 years. According to the authors, this Jewish revival has notably affected the age groups of 25 – 44 and 45 – 64-year-olds, and the very young Hungarian Jews at a slower pace. Barna and Kovács also argue that striking trends of intermarriage will not necessarily lead to the disappearance of Jewish tradition in Hungary.

However, the identified revival of Jewish religious and cultural customs in Hungary seems to not be automatically connected with a significant presence in veteran nor recently established Jewish communities. **Zsófia Kata Vincze** estimates that about eighty-five to ninety percent of Hungarians with any Jewish background are not instantly committed or affiliated with any of the functioning Jewish organisations. Nevertheless, Vincze assumes that the constant creation and re-creation of additional institutions indicate that active Hungarian Jews still believe in reaching out to the "greater Jewish population" and eventually attracting "the missing ninety percent."

Avihu Ronen raises the question of hyphenated identities among Jews in Central Europe, albeit going back to the second half of the 1940s. He recalls Jewish communist leadership's attempts shortly after World War II and the Shoah while trying to realise both supporting the project of the Jewish State and also encouraging a new social formation in their countries of origin. The "experiment" continued until 1950, while this idea paradoxically subverted itself. The efforts of the Zionist movements led out of Europe, thus weakening the local Jewish communities. In parallel, the totalitarian regimes aimed to assimilate the remaining Jewish populations.

Further, more recent decline brought many Jewish communities into difficulty at the end of the Cold War when tens of thousands of Jews left, especially Eastern Europe, and headed to Israel or the U.S.

Still, in the early 1990s, remnant Jewish communities with international support became properly re-organized, initiating their own redefinition and opening new chapters with Christians, Muslims, Roma, and other ethnoreligious neighbours.

Such new ways and experiences are exemplarily illustrated in ***Section III***, *Jewish Past and Present in the Czech Republic*. Here, **Jiří Holý** depicts how Czech cinema and literature featured the murder of 80,000 Czech and Moravian Jews after World War II. As he writes, Jewish topics and literary debates on the Holocaust sprung up, especially during the 1960s. Holý refers to two different

approaches regarding this subject: on the one hand, a "closed narrative" which portrayed the Shoah as a monumental narrative with authentic details, and, on the other, an "open narrative" which presented the persecution of Jews and the war without any heroism, pathos, and sentiment, featuring objective reports, but also farcical and tragicomic elements. After the 1989 Velvet Revolution, this literary tradition witnesses a remarkable continuation.

Marcela Menachem Zoufalá reflects on how Czech Jews relate to the contemporary State of Israel and poses the question of whether Israel appears as a "distant beloved homeland" or rather as an "ambivalent bond." Menachem Zoufalá indeed argues Czech Jews are distancing themselves from Israel, though for quite different reasons than, for example, American Jews. Based on a qualitative anthropological study, the author detects two particular, yet interconnected themes repeatedly emerging. First, the mentioned partial disengagement which seems to occur in the context of the transformation of ethnic setting within the Israeli population. In other words, we are referring to a process often identified as Mizrahization. The second interrelated theme represents nostalgic, idealized views of the Central European Jewish past. This mental imagery, to some extent, weighs into the distancing of Czech Jews from Israel and the Israelis.

Zbyněk Tarant dedicates his contribution to the current situation and the future perspectives of the very small and fragmented communities of Jews and Muslims in the Czech Republic. Both struggle with certain trends of particularism, and they share the reality of being relatively less plentiful (ethno)religious minorities within a quite secularised majority society. Present encounters between the members affiliated with any communities or institutions seem rather rare, and according to Tarant, the relations, while "not ideal," nevertheless can be characterized as being "correct." Nevertheless, escalations of the Middle East conflict(s) unsettle both groups, and the mainstream perception of the consequences of the so-called refugee wave might challenge the relatively peaceful status quo on both sides.

Michal Schuster describes Jewish-Roma relations in the Czech Republic as an essential alliance against present racism. Czech Roma and Jews have both struggled with hostility, persecution, and annihilation during the time of German Nazi occupation, and these common experiences have carved into their collective memories. Contacts between Jews and Roma in the country are solidly cohesive, and the groups support each other in their efforts to establish vivid forms of remembrance. Thus, Roma representatives attend the annual events on the Yom ha-Shoah in Prague, while several Jewish institutions – like the Jewish Museum and the Terezín Initiative Institute in Prague – actively cooperate with the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno.

Like a microcosmos of the whole Central Europe, Jewish life and Jewish-/non-Jewish relations in the Czech Republic reveal striking developments and opportunities that nobody would have had predicted at the turn of the millennium. Though, also in the Middle of Europe – like across the "old continent" – the ghost of Judeophobia seems to have returned. Despite continuing efforts of elucidation, programs of further education, and prevention, antisemitism is also in Central Europe rigorous in the air; or in more latent forms such as Holocaust denial and relativization of the Shoah.

In the opening article of ***Section IV***, *An Ongoing Struggle with Judeophobia*, **Dina Porat** interprets Holocaust denial as a symptom of unresolved European history, writing: "Denying the Holocaust might mutate to a 'cultural event,' not taken that seriously by large publics but disdaining the victims and the survivors." Furthermore, Porat claims that it is of utmost gravity to realise that the across-Europe urge to deny or at least to relativize the Holocaust is not a problem of uneducated social strata, on the contrary. A "competition of victimhood" (Bernard-Henri Levy) seems to be taking place behind the scene.

Haim Fireberg analyses an antisemitic paradox, based on empirical data, collected among Jews and non-Jews in Europe. According to him, the level of violent antisemitism does not necessarily indicate the state of antisemitic perceptions. Generally, it could be a necessary condition in defining an antisemitic atmosphere, but undoubtedly not a sufficient one. Moreover, there is growing frustration from the political establishment, from ruling parties, and the deficient solutions they supply to control antisemitism, but even more importantly to provide a common basis for fractioned societies. Fireberg is convinced that without belief in the future of the country, and without confidence that Jews are an essential component of their respective society, Jews feel abandoned, and the problem will continue to exist.

The ***Appendix*** entitled *Memories, Reflections, and Prospects* mainly turns to present-day challenges for Jews and non-Jews, especially on how to define disparities and similarities in the context of commemorating the past and on how to determine cultural mutualities (or polarities). Most of the contributors demonstrate these issues in the cases of ongoing developments in Poland.

Konstanty Gebert poses the question, "What is, in fact, Jewish about Central European Jewish Culture?" To a certain extent, he builds on Ruth Ellen Gruber's book *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* and shows through examples of today's Poland that non-Jewish interest in former, authentic Jewish (cultural) tradition extends beyond the limit. Gebert argues that "a problem, however, arises when we have non-Jews not only organising or consuming Jewish culture, but producing it: writing novels on Jewish themes, for example, or composing and performing klezmer music."

Anna Chipczyńska, former president of the Jewish Community of Warsaw, raises the challenge of preserving Jewish Cemeteries in Poland. As a point of departure, she refers to the Law of February 1997 on the Relations between the Polish State and the Jewish Religious Communities, which regulates, inter alia, the rules for the return of the pre-WWII Jewish communal property to the contemporary Jewish communities in Poland. The main question remains: how shall a community with just a few thousand organized Jews manage the preserving of more than 1,200 Jewish cemeteries across the land? Chipczyńska also refers to some other very relevant laws that might affect the future of Poland's Jewish cemeteries, such as the 1959 law on Cemeteries and Burying the Deceased, the 2003 law on Spatial Planning, and the 2003 law on the Protection and Preservation of National Heritage. The author argues that "these tools are both a challenge and a chance for the protection of Jewish cemeteries in Poland. Their effective application could theoretically make the Jewish community a very successful watchdog and heritage preservation organisation."[7]

Natalia Sineaeva-Pankowska portrays the "Polish Complexities of Dealing with the Past" from a guide's perspective, specifically from her personal experiences as a guide and educator in the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, which opened in 2014. Sineaeva-Pankowska testifies that the Polin Museum does not only concentrate on multidimensional historical ties of the Polish-Jewish past, but also tackles difficult subjects. For example, it includes quite recent outrageous events, such as the anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland in 1941 and anti-Jewish violence in 1944 – 1946, in order to reflect the shadow which lies upon the Polish past. This first-hand account is highly relevant, especially in times of constant growth of distinct nationalist trends of revisionism and "whitewashing," which are succeeding not only in Poland, but in other countries of Central Europe as well.

Finally, the focus returns to the Czech Republic. **Tomáš Kraus**, the Executive Director of the local Federation of Jewish Communities since 1991, ruminates on the more than one thousand years of Jewish presence on the territory of today's Czech Republic. He illustrates the significant extent to which Jewish thinkers and artists have influenced Czech culture and identity. Despite that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Czech Jewish communities struggle to find their unique expression. On the other hand, Kraus underlines that the Czech Jews find themselves in a comfortable position: "The Czech Republic – with

7 However, in August 2018, the Polish government had declared that it would map out all the Jewish cemeteries in the country and establish a computerised database with information about the people buried there and the local Jewish history. See Ynet News, August 12, 2018, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5419925,00.html, accessed March 15, 2019.

all its controversies in the public arena – is a safe-haven for Jews. But is that enough? Can we survive without new programs, without new ideas, without opening-up, instead of closing down because of conservative approaches?"

This is a whole range of crucial questions that might influence Jewish existence in the twenty-first century – not only in Central Europe but across the continent and beyond. This collective monograph represents a rather minor piece in a broader discussion that has been gradually unfolding over the years.

With this, we would like to express our gratitude to all respectable authors for their valuable contributions. Further, our sincere appreciation is extended to the Tel Aviv University, Charles University, and the Moses Mendelssohn Centre for European Jewish Studies at the University of Potsdam, all of which supported the conception and making of this book with remarkable expertise and great enthusiasm. For the important work of proofreading and improving the manuscript we owe a great deal to Anna Hupcejová, Gritt Wehnelt and Vijay Khosa. Lastly, we wish to present our special thanks to De Gruyter Publishing House for including this book in its prestigious "European Jewish Studies" series.

Marcela Menachem Zoufalá, Olaf Glöckner, Haim Fireberg