
PEELING THE BRATISLAVA ONION (Collective Memory in Incomplete Communities)¹

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Abstract

In his memoirs, Günter Grass used the analogy of “peeling the onion” and he gradually peeled off layers of his memories. This procedure did not work in researching the Bratislava (not only the Jewish) society of the 20th century. Due to historic events, several significant city-forming elements of the inhabitants disappeared from the Bratislava demographic map (but also from the memory of most contemporaries). Prior to the Holocaust, Orthodox Jews predominated in the city. Today, they make up a negligible, even forgotten minority. A similar fate affected the Zionists, too. According to available data, 10,000 Jewish people left Slovakia between 1945 and 1949; of them, 90% chose Palestine/Israel as their target country. Migrants from the countryside replaced them. However, they were not able to make up for past losses, either in terms of quantity or quality. There was enough evidence that “peeling of onion” is not suitable if the studied sample does not represent a whole spectrum of a given environment. If this method were mechanically applied, it would result in a simplified picture of both the Jewish community and the city in which it lived. It is also important to consider the fact that the Holocaust influenced not only the demographic community structure, but also the value system of its members. Thus, there is the seemingly paradoxical procedure of “wrapping the onion up.”

Keywords: *Bratislava, Jews, collective memory, 20th century*

¹ This study has been written within the framework of the Excellency Center COPART and VEGA grant No.2/5105/25 entitled “The Diversification as the Factor of Identity Shaping.”

Among the dominant sites of Rybné námestie (Fish Square) in the center of Bratislava was not only Saint Martin's Dome but also a beautiful Neologue synagogue. In the mid-1960s it gave way to more pragmatic needs of the developing city. It was replaced by the New Bridge and only the Holocaust Victims' Memorial symbolically indicates the former Jewish presence in this space. The inscription on the pedestal of the monument contains the Hebrew word "Zakhor!" and its Slovak translation "Remember!" The memorial is supposed to be a memento of the tragedy of the Jewish community, but at the same time it is also a silent memento for ethnologists. It warns us to approach human memory (individual as well as collective) cautiously and critically... On the basis of testimonies of two generations I try to illustrate how and why the picture of the Jewish community (but also the German, Hungarian and, in fact, the whole community of Bratislava) was (de)formed in the interwar period.

In his memoirs, German writer Günter Grass used the analogy of peeling the onion and gradually peeled one layer of memories after another. A similar technique is also routinely applied in ethnology. However, in the case of the Bratislava (and not only Jewish) society of the 20th century, this procedure has not proven useful. It turned out that the peeled onion is not complete and the resulting picture corresponded with this fact. Historical events of the recent past brought about partial or even total elimination (from the Bratislava demographic map and from people's memory) of important groups of city residents who had previously created the spirit of the city.

For my analysis I use findings of the projects "They Survived the Holocaust" between 1994 and 1997 carried out by the Milan Šimečka Foundation in cooperation with Yale University (see Vrzgulová 2002). Most of the 149 witnesses were born and/or lived in Bratislava. I map the generation of "children of the Holocaust" (born between 1940 and 1952) through more than 14,000 e-mails from the website established by Jewish emigrants from Bratislava. Its main goal was to organize a reunion that took place in May 2005, but the site also contains discussions and personal memories of the city. Almost all of the 202 participants have some personal ties to Bratislava (for more details, see Salner 2007).

According to the census of 1930, 14,880 residents of Bratislava (11.7 % of the population) declared their religion to be Jewish; in 2001, it was just a few per mille (278 individuals). The present-day Jewish community is a small heterogeneous, secular group of people linked together by ties of a common origin rather than by traditional values of Judaism.

Before the Holocaust, the Orthodox denomination prevailed in the city. In Bratislava, this denomination was personified by Khatam Sofer (Moshe Schreiber). Especially thanks to him, Bratislava (in Hebrew or Yiddish still called Pressburg) earned the name of "the second" or "Hungarian" Jerusalem. His authority illustrates the fact that, from the year of his arrival in 1806 until the forced expatriation of his great grandson in 1942, the position of the main city rabbi was exclusively taken by his descendants. Until now, Orthodox Jews still commemorate his personality and respect his decisions related to halakha.

At present, Orthodox Jews in Bratislava are only a negligible, even a forgotten minority. Most of them perished in death camps and those who had survived the Holocaust left Slovakia (for more details, see Salner 2000). Authentic memories of contemporaries are only partly substituted by older memoir literature published abroad (Gold 1932, Cohn 1999, Grünhut 1972, Kohút 1991 etc.). In his memoirs, Bratislava native Cohn (1929) illustrates that the affinity to one's own city and the personality of Khatam Sofer still influence (not only) his thinking and acting. After all, he gave proof of this by his active participation in the renovation of Khatam Sofer's tomb (for more details, see Salner-Kvasnica 2002). In the above-mentioned memoirs, he writes: "Pressburg was a great center of Judaism in which the study of the Talmud and Torah provided life energy, the substance of our daily life. Synagogues and study rooms were on every corner and Jews studied the Scripture there with great intensity and tender devotion. In Pressburg, Jewish family life flourished and the city became a home for many students and scholars. As a matter of fact, the Pressburg "Great Yeshiva" was one of the topnotch institutions not only in Central Europe but in Europe as a whole." (Cohn 1999:21-22)

The extinction of the once numerous Orthodox community meant that the fame of the renowned rabbi is still present in the city, but not his influence. The fostering of traditional values that he summed up in the legendary sentence "khadash asur min ha-Torah," which means "all that's new the Torah prohibits" (Myers 1997:36), has not become part of the normative system of the community. Although Sofer's name is known to and proudly remembered by all Bratislava Jews, most of them reject Orthodox Judaism. Especially on his "yarzeit" (the memorial day of his death), his grave resembles old Orthodox Pressburg rather than the present secular Bratislava. But for the people of today Khatam Sofer is not a role model; he is more a formal symbol of the long-gone past.

This fact is related to the forcible transformation of the community and ensuing changes in its structure. In the interwar period, about 80 % of the

Bratislava Jews were Orthodox. The dominant position of traditional Judaism is also illustrated by large-scale activities of various associations. The most frequent were religious associations with Orthodox orientation. Also important were charity and educational (mostly religious) activities. In Bratislava, there were also a number of athletic and scout clubs. The Zionist movement was especially active in this respect, as it deliberately prepared its members for harsh conditions in the new homeland. Professional associations were also common (for more details, see Grünsfeld 1932: 179-185, Grünhut 1972: 169-170; Salner 1997: 67-68).

Even a cursory analysis shows that values of different branches of Judaism were often incompatible. These differences persisted even during the Holocaust. Although the regime planned the “final solution” for all Jews, the Orthodox were more jeopardized than the rest of the community due to their visibility and their refusal to make compromises on religious matters. Besides “official violence,” “spontaneous” attacks by some Bratislava residents were also directed against them. This situation is described by Cohn (1999:33): “Without a word – no questions, no warnings, no explanations – one after another the three men started to beat my father. First they beat him with their fists; they kicked him while laughing devilishly. I cried out for help, but nobody came to rescue us. I begged them to stop. I shouted as much as I could while they were beating him. The local police did not help although they had never before been anti-Semitic. They only looked on. The Hlinka Guards left my father on the street, bleeding, motionless and almost unconscious. Proud of what they had just done, they triumphantly marched away. Only thanks to God’s grace did we escape death. My father moaned slightly. My first thought was that he was dying, that they had killed him. But he slowly got up and we silently walked back home. We never spoke about this attack. Attacks like this became commonplace, so there was nothing to speak about. We only thanked God that we were still alive.”

Avri F. (1953) and other witnesses confirm that the experience just mentioned was by no means exceptional, and that attacks were mostly aimed at Orthodox Jews: *I think that the worst thing I’ve ever learned, and which is related to Slovak, not German, anti-Semitism, happened during the days of the outbreak of the war, on September 1, 1939. My uncle, my father’s brother, was an attorney, Dr Gustáv Fischer. He lived on Palisády and was waiting for a bus when two young bullies approached him and asked him if he was a Jew. He didn’t even have to answer because he looked like a Jew and maybe they actually knew him. They dragged him into a nearby house and beat him and left him there. Later my*

mother told me that my uncle had been beaten up and that it wasn’t sure if he was going to survive. I wanted to go see him in the hospital, and I went, and I saw him in bed there; I don’t know if he saw us and if he was conscious, but I do know he died the next day. He had internal bleeding and so on. A few days later, his wife – they didn’t have children – could not cope with it and she committed suicide. She jumped out of the window and died, too. So, this was something that had already happened in our family before the death camps and all those things.

Religious people, if they survived, usually fled Slovakia right after the war. The primary destination was Palestine/Israel, although for many reasons many Orthodox Jews preferred overseas democratic countries. Traditional Judaism left Bratislava not only physically. Customs, values and beliefs also disappeared from people’s memory and from the memory map of the Jewish community. It was the same with Zionists. The key thesis of their ideology was relocation to the new homeland with the view of establishing a modern Jewish state. After the Holocaust, it was Zionism that offered, especially to young people, a positive outlook, including the possibility of returning to the lost faith. This situation and the role of the Zionist movement (in her case of Hashomer Hacair) were best described by Chava Š. (1935) as follows: *In September I started attending high school and my brother had already been long active in the Zionist movement Hashomer Hacair, and I also joined in. That need to be part of something was very strong. We loved Hashomer Hacair, which was on Zochova 3. There were two buildings there – one for the Jewish Community, and we had religious school there and next to it was a building for Jewish youth organizations. Down in the gymnasium was Hashomer Hacair, in the middle there was Makabi Hacair and on the upper story were Bnei Akiba and those more religious groups. We had a great time there. Nobody ever mentioned the Holocaust. We buried it somewhere and didn’t want to talk about it. We wanted to be young, healthy, bring new ideas... and I think that those who were our leaders saved us, psychologically saved us. We had had a bad childhood, but we had a nice adolescence. As a matter of fact, we had nothing; it was the post-wartime times, but we didn’t care; we had our parties and first loves and friendships and winter and summer camps; we were happy we were about to live something important.*

She was not the only one. According to available data, between 1945 and 1949 about 10,000 people left Slovakia, 90% of them for Palestine/Israel (Jablonková 1998, see also Büchler 1998: 80; Bumová 2006: 122). The success of Zionist efforts paradoxically meant the victory of ideas and simultaneous destruction of the movement in Slovakia. Only fragments of the initial mem-

bership stayed. Campaigns of Communist power against Zionism and cosmopolitanism caused erstwhile activists to be unwilling to speak either about the movement's goals or their own activities. Zionism also fell out of the spectrum of memories of the Bratislava Jews.

As is apparent, most of the community left Bratislava – either forcibly or voluntarily. In their place, newcomers from various parts of the Slovak countryside came. However, these could not measure up to the old community either in terms of numbers or content. They did not know the history of the city. Their perception of its history and affinity to Jewish traditions were different. The decision to stay in Slovakia was linked in the minds of many Jews with deliberate assimilation. This strategy followed from a loss of faith after the Holocaust, but also from the conviction that the Communist orientation of the country guaranteed that the past would not be repeated. This went hand in hand with the Slovakization of their original, mostly German surnames. The Fund of the Plenipotentiary for Home Affairs in the Slovak National Archives contains many applications for surname changes in 1945 and 1946. Their explanations are very interesting and they help us understand both people's motivations and the climate of the period:

I have a German-sounding last name that I wish to change to the Slovak-sounding one since I belong to this nationality and I always have; I am applying for a surname change from German to Slovak because I deem it undignified to have a German name; As a Slovak I do not want to use a German-sounding name; I am taking the liberty to humbly ask you to process my application swiftly as I am in the process of applying for a small business license and, since I am baptized, as is my wife, I would like to cut myself off from the past and start a new life in accordance with my change of religion; I don't want my old surname to remind me of the old regime; I wish to start my new job with a Slovak last name; I have a non-Slovak sounding name and my brother submitted a similar application so I would like to ask you to handle my request also. I was persecuted because of my race, imprisoned by the Gestapo in Auschwitz (I have a tattoo on my forearm). I have always considered myself to be Slovak although my religion is Jewish, so I am asking you to change my surname; I am applying for a surname change because my surname is at odds with my thinking and feelings; I do not wish to have a surname of German origin, particularly because my husband was shot by the Gestapo; I humbly ask for expeditious processing of my application as my wife is a state-employed teacher; I do not want to have any trouble that might follow if I kept my original surname Kohn (for more details, see Salner 1998).

Many reinforced these attitudes of the period by joining the Communist Party. Membership offered (at least seemingly) safety and better career outlooks. At play were also other factors: gratefulness for the liberation of the country by the Red Army, the conviction that the Communist Party would create a just social system. Motives of revenge, opportunism, and fear cannot be ruled out either. And many of those who acknowledged their background rejected religious elements. Only a small part of those who stayed in Slovakia admitted to being Jewish (see Salner 2000).

Their decisions (whether motivated by conviction or pragmatic reasons) were also reflected in their personal lives. They often concealed their Jewish origin even from their own children. These “children of the Holocaust,” i.e., people who were born between 1940 and 1955, were reaching adolescence at the end of the 1950s and mostly in the 1960s. People came to their Jewish identity in various ways; some through their homes and others (often against the will of their families) from outside impulses. After August 1968, most members of both the young and middle generations chose emigration. In comparison to the period after the Holocaust, it is interesting to analyze the choice of destinations. While in 1945 and 1946 Palestine/Israel prevailed, after the Soviet occupation the situation was more complicated.

First of all, it must be said that most members of the community in the productive age chose to leave the country. In the young and middle generations the number of those who left relative to those who stayed in the country is much larger than in the rest of the population. Heitlingerová (2007: 139), on the basis of her own experiences, tried to explain this situation. As she writes: “Because of their more cosmopolitan education, better command of languages and better knowledge of the West, they didn't fear emigration as much as many other Czechs and Slovaks. In contrast to their non-Jewish counterparts, they could rely on various forms of help from relatives, Western Jewish organizations and/or Jewish host families.” This view was also confirmed by a sample of people at the reunion. Of the 202 individuals born between 1940 and 1952 only 28 (13.8%) stayed in Slovakia. 86.2% of the people from this sample chose emigration. Changes in value orientations, compared to the period after the Holocaust, illustrate destination preferences: 30 people (14.8%) chose Israel (additional data showed that Israel was the country of first choice for more than these 30 people, but some, for various reasons, moved to the USA, Australia, Germany, etc.; nevertheless, even taking these facts into account, Israel was a much less frequent destination than in the 1940s). Most people (34, or 16.8%) chose the

USA; another 13.3% live in Canada. From the regional perspective, the majority of the people chose countries in Central and Western Europe (see Salner 2006).

These data illustrate the direction and the mass scope of emigration (as well as its impact on the life of the Bratislava community). The data should not be taken too generally, but they do indicate prevailing trends. At least 174 individuals born between 1940 and 1952 left Slovakia. Among current members of the Bratislava Jewish Religious Community there are only 136 people in this age group. It is apparent that most of the members of this generation emigrated and only a minority stayed in Slovakia. Impacts of this fact on the community and individuals can be illustrated by an e-mail by Tamara K. (at present living in Montreal): *Sunday evening when I looked around and saw all those people engaged in conversation standing around me in groups I realized what a big loss this has been for our home country when all of us able and precious people left it. And even though we have found happiness in our new homes and we would not trade them for anything, still we were robbed of the chance to spend our lives together with our childhood friends. And I was sad when I realized how we attacked like a swarm of locusts those who did stay in Bratislava and we stirred up all those emotions and then we packed up and left.* (A complex analysis of the impact of emigration of the Jewish community would also need to take into account the emigration of the generation of parents (who at that time were middle aged) and the absence of the generation of children born abroad).

The last straw to show the dark side of the regime was the trial of Rudolf Slánský. At that time, many members of my sample were already old enough to be able to perceive what was happening around them. This is confirmed by reactions to the e-mail in which one contributor characterized Communism as a criminal regime, but not as primarily anti-Semitic: “Communism is an ideology and it doesn’t fight against nations but against other ideologies. I argue its intention wasn’t to want to wipe out Jewry.” This opinion resulted in a broad and often emotional polemic. Besides arguments, it brought many personal experiences of the sample members. They show how they remembered those times as well as Bratislava. People spoke about their parents’ or other relatives’ incarceration; they recollected forcible relocations, expulsions from work, troubles in school or workplace. Perhaps the strongest impression was left by their emotional personal reflections on childhood experiences: “I can’t take this any longer; I’m so shocked I can’t even argue. But I don’t know how it was possible to conceal all that from the children – I would go to see my

father in the prison, to Příbram, Leopoldov etc., but that was after some time. At first we didn’t even know if he was alive. When my father touched my pinkie through bars, they punished him with solitary confinement and he was forbidden to keep in touch with his family. That’s just a small detail, by the way. Anybody can read my mom’s memoirs. I recommend them, although this may sound strange from her own daughter” (Táňa L., Sweden). The above-mentioned memoirs (Langerová 2007) published in Swedish and English portray a very impressive picture of how “high politics” of the 1950s was mirrored in the life of a concrete Jewish family.

This example is extreme in a way, but the topic also evoked negative feelings in other people. As one of the directly afflicted stated: “This topic is VERY painful, although you wrote exactly what I didn’t feel like writing. There are many among us whose parents were in jail and we did not grow up in the most healthy of climates” (Magda B., Israel).

In another case, childhood memories are related to forcible vacation of the apartment and later also relocation from Bratislava, when her father was placed in “production.” Consequences of dramatic events still remain in people’s minds: “I’m also haunted by bad childhood memories when my dad was kicked out of work (in one hour). Then they kicked us out of our apartment and we lived in Lafranconi (outskirts of the then-Bratislava) where you also lived in Auntie Hajlig’s basement, and we lived one story above you, at my mother’s aunt’s place in one room. And in Pukanec (with my mom’s relatives), where my sister was born, they sent us to the movies on Sunday so that we wouldn’t cry when dad was leaving for Bratislava where he worked in ‘production.’ All this remains burnt into one’s mind, one’s soul.” (Minka N., Germany). This e-mail had an unplanned continuation. In the book *Censored Life*, Ladislav Porjez described the circumstances under which he met Minka’s father during his visit to Bratislava: “I was struck when in one of the ditches I was passing by I saw my former classmate from the Michalovce high school digging with a pick. It was engineer Bernard Schönbrun, who after the liberation kept his second, more Slovak-sounding name Knežo, under which his Aryan papers had saved him from transports. ‘Hi Berco,’ I bellowed, ‘are you volunteering for public works?’ My friend Berco leaned on his pick for a moment and then he angrily shouted at me. ‘What volunteer work, you ass? They kicked me out of the office and this is what I have already had to do for two months.’ I was taken aback so I asked tactlessly: ‘And what did you do?’ Berco was mad: ‘Do you live on Mars, moron? Or don’t they give Jews the sack in Mother Prague?’”

Life could be made unpleasant not only by forced relocations, but also by the allocation of one or more rooms in one's apartment to complete strangers. This was often not the only repression: "They did not kick my mom and her two daughters (my sister and me) out of the apartment, but they placed a family in our place. We lived under constant supervision, if that could be called a life. I still vividly remember how my mom would stroll by the police office each day while my dad was kept in Bratislava. I don't like to go back to this topic; it's still too painful, even today" (Magda B., Israel).

Amir S. (Israel) illustrates the harassment experienced by small business owners. In addition to direct repressions, he points out the phenomenon of fear present in the whole of Slovak society (for more details, see Kamenec 1992). But fear had a special place in the Jewish milieu, where memories of the Holocaust were still alive: "I would add that I well remember how my father feared they would kick him out of the Party. He was an entrepreneur and, in addition to huge taxes, he also paid in another way – with his membership in the Party. He knew very well that the moment he lost his Party membership card he would lose his business. The father of our neighbor was in jail because they "proved" that he had been hiding a transmitter in a Jewish cemetery and was sending messages to Israel."

An attempt at some generalization of memories and experiences also points to the ubiquitous fear that influenced everyday life of (Jewish) people:

"Unfortunately, this was not just some Jewish paranoia and, as somebody said, 'The fact that you are paranoid doesn't mean you're not being followed by the secret police.' I do not claim that at the time it was only Jews who were persecuted. There were many groups of freethinkers that the Communist regime did not like, but they were persecuted because of their views and not because they were 'Jews.' Many Jews changed their names in order not to be harassed. Some committed suicide to avoid being arrested. Many were fired from their jobs, but many were unlucky enough to have been arrested and spent time in prison on not very clear charges. Anyhow, Jews lived in constant fear of when and from where it was going to strike them again. Of course, they tried to protect their children and, as much as possible, held information back from them" (Dada K., Israel).

The voluminous e-mail correspondence also mirrors the fact that the majority of this sample group are the first generation born in Bratislava. They lack the historical background; their relationship with the city and community is limited to what they could learn through their own experience. Similarly,

their religious feelings are lukewarm. They confirm the thesis of Heitlinger (2007:114) according to whom "...in most Czech and Slovak Jews of the post-war generation, Judaism did not inspire as strong emotions as mentions about the Holocaust, Israel, communism or anti-Semitism." Still, especially during the holidays, childhood memories or religious thoughts also come to the forefront: "I was most moved by the picture of the Heydukova synagogue. I also remember how, on many holidays, we ran around the backyard or told jokes and looked at boys. I could kick myself for not even going to look there when I was in Bratislava" (Tamara K., Montreal). "I, too, was moved by that picture of the synagogue on Heydukova. I was recollecting how we played chase in the yards and how Ďula-bácsi came to scold us because we were too noisy – and we gathered nuts in the garden there..." (Katka K., London). Rather telling is also the remark of Viktor R. who regards as one of the highlights of his stay in Bratislava the moments when he and his childhood friend could stand in the synagogue on those places where their fathers once used to gather and pray.

Also interesting are e-mails about religious education. Although several people from the sample group write about this topic, they do not disconfirm Heitlinger's thesis, as they still constitute a minority. The main character of many stories was Mr. E., who used to prepare boys for their bar mitzvah. What stayed in the memories of his pupils were not only Orthodox religious facts he taught them, but also memories of his unorthodox teaching methods. But it seems that in spite of their unconventional nature they bore fruits: "In all Bratislava, there wasn't a single child who would not go to Mr. E's classes." (Peter D., Israel). "I will never forget the words he told me when he was teaching me for my bar mitzvah, 'Where are you now, dear son? while he was pulling my peyes.'" (Tomy K., Israel); "I wished it had stopped with pulling my peyes. What about those slaps and banging on the table? That's nothing? And I'm not mentioning that his pupils had to use umbrellas to stay dry from his saliva." And next day the same contributor (Michal D. from Israel) added: "I didn't go to Mr. E. only to get bar mitzvah classes. He taught me for a good deal of years. That was some 'folklore'! (I remember some of my classmates who, because of his special methods, burst into tears and Mr. E. then wiped their eyes with his used handkerchief...That was fun.); "Just now Ivan is telling me how he used to lecture him while, of course, pulling his ear, 'Read, son, read.' As a matter of fact, this method must have worked because, when we came to Israel in 1968, Ivan could read Ivrit (modern Hebrew) almost perfectly and he found ulpan (Hebrew study center for new emigrants to Israel) even easier (Soňa V., Toronto);

These activities were also seen from another angle: “At any rate, it was no small thing that during that regime we could gain at least some knowledge of our faith. In that way continuity was ensured. We should thank Mr. E. for undertaking that task. And he wasn’t a teacher? How many so-called teachers are there in the world that shouldn’t even be let near children?” (Róbert Sch., Switzerland);

Only a small group declared that they practice religion and that they more or less keep kashrut (kosher), Shabbat (the Sabbath), holidays or other mitzvot (commandments).

It is important to mention that education (not religious, but secular) played an important role in the value system of the postwar generation of the Slovak Jewish youth (and of their parents). Practically everyone graduated from some sort of high school, mainly vocational. After high school graduation many went on to university, but again emphasis was on a pragmatic choice of study. Motivation (and influence of the older generation) to get an education is illustrated by an excerpt from a long narrative by Tomi N. from Germany: “After grade school, I went to a chemistry high school and, as I found out at the reunion, so did many other friends. Having some ‘bread in our hands’ was in line with the ideas of our parents’ generation. After this first step, I went to Comenius University in 1965 to study chemistry, which, at that time, was taught in a compulsory combination with physics. (...) Because according to the ‘doctrine’ of those times, and experiences of maybe all our parents, only a higher level of education and hence also better chances to succeed in life and career provided ‘protection’ from the surrounding society. Besides that, what you have in your head nobody can take away from you. That was based on their experiences.”

It is interesting to note how Bratislava appeared in reminiscences of those people who left the city almost forty years ago. What prevailed was nostalgia, childhood memories, but also the human factor in the form of a desire to renew personal contacts with friends. One e-mail written by one of those few who had stayed in the city warned against possible disappointment due to heightened expectations: “Please, do be aware that ‘a reunion is a reunion is a reunion.’ There will be a lot of schmoozing and recollecting. Do not expect anything more or less. If your excitement grows 45 days before the reunion, you’re going to be disappointed. But if you expect us to look awful, to have big bellies and bald heads, then it’s possible this reunion will leave you psychologically empowered.” (Fero A., Bratislava).

Among the e-mails, there were some practical advice and experiences gained during recent visits of the town, but also criticism of things that did not work. These were also confrontations with what the city used to look like in their youth:

“Youth has rosy spectacles, and I still think about what they used to say about Bratislava (during the figure-skating championship when they planted thousands of flowers), that she’s a beauty on the Danube. I don’t know if she’s really a beauty; they tore down half of the Old Town – below the Castle, but the rest is in rather good shape (and expensive). The city is starting to have a pleasant atmosphere again; one can sit in a café on the promenade; the girls are pretty. (...) You’ll surely confirm that sledding was the best on Kuzmanka, and romantic strolls at Slavín, the fish salad was the best in that store across the street from Manderlák, the cream-filled pastries in the ‘Children’s Confectionery,’ the string cheese at St. Michael’s Gate and the beer in the ‘Privy Bar’ at the Danube.” (Soňa V., Toronto).

Those who live in Bratislava tried to correct (sometimes quite tactlessly) these idealized expectations: “The house across the street from Manderlák is not there anymore, the ‘Children’s Confectionery’ was turned into a beer bar – they are remodeling right now, but the bar will stay there because better business than a beer bar could only be a ‘marihuana bar.’ Nowadays, you can get string cheese and steamed cheese everywhere and Slovakia has problems with the EU because the best bryndza cheese is made only when EU food safety norms are violated; besides, Romanians insisted (although they are not in the EU) that the original bryndza was theirs, so I don’t know. The ‘Privy Bar’ is no longer there and youngsters go boozing all over the place. Nobody can even keep track of them.”

The outside perspectives were useful not only to those who were coming from abroad, but also for the locals. It is not surprising that a long e-mail sent by Eva L. from Toronto called “Going shopping” was unofficially considered the best e-mail ever sent to the website: “This e-mail is intended for those who use shopping as successful short-term therapy, fun and entertainment. Those who have everything better skip this e-mail and go to more important topics. Since some of you will have only a little time, we can exchange advice/experiences about where to go shopping. Before you start:

1. Put on your thick skin. The remarks of a shop assistant shouldn’t discourage you from reaching your goals. The conversations I experienced were as follows: ‘Can you please show me that yellow sweater?’ ‘We don’t have your size.’ (How did she know what my size was and for whom I was buying it?)

‘Can you please show me that first bag?’ ‘You can’t afford that one.’ (Has the word already spread?)

‘Can you please show me that ashtray?’ ‘I can’t, it’s only for foreign guests.’ (Which passport should I quickly pull out?)

‘Excuse me. That ice cream is leaking. The container is cracked. Could I have a napkin?’ (A burst of laughter in the background). ‘That woman wants a napkin! Look at the sign, madam, this place is in the B price category, madam.’

At the cashier’s in a grocery store I was stopped by a security guard who told me ‘Open and show me your bag!’ ‘My bag? Why? I’m a foreigner; I’m not used to this kind of treatment.’ ‘You can even be from Hungary, for all I care. I’m still gonna search you.’

‘Please, do you have size 4 slippers? I’ll show size 11, that’s all we have.’

2. Be careful with handbags, passports, necklaces and credit cards. Leave them in the hotel safe. You should be especially careful when using your credit card in the Duty Free shop at the airport. If they know you’re traveling home you might later receive bills for jewels from all over the world that would be hard to explain. Changing money is easy, but look at the exchange rates as they are different at each counter.

3. Ask for a tax-free stamp when making larger payments. Count on the fact that at the airport you won’t be able to find a customs officer to stamp it, and throw it in the box at the airport. Then wait...keep waiting...

4. You can purchase duty-free items on the plane. I believe that in Prague, when changing planes, according to new EU laws, we are not allowed to buy duty free.

5. (You can buy) beautiful and affordable Carlsbad porcelain (yes, I do need one more set, as in those dishwashers everything gets chipped) and good presents like a cake tray or a tea set on Štúrova street and on Korzo.

6. Leather goods, sheep skin jackets, cardigans in the summer for half price in Mikuláš or in the Dunaj department store.

7. Garnet cuff links, earrings – Leningradská.

8. Sentimental foods (custard, chocolate-covered cherries) – in Dom potravín, Teta or Prior.

Well, I’m already tired. It’s time to have coffee and a chestnut tart (made with beans) in the Slovan gallery (the movie theater has disappeared).

I welcome your advice and connections. Many things have changed, names of streets, prices, but some things – the more they change the more they stay

the same. Please, take it with humor; I don’t want to offend anyone; I’m just sharing my experiences. Happy shopping. I wish you successful shopping, good sales, safe transport of purchased goods back home. And do buy luggage insurance, but that’s a different story.”

Soňa V. from Toronto said in surprise: “...so nothing has changed? I thought you were describing the times when we were still home (of course, the difference was that often many goods were not available).”

People sent several amused comments, factual remarks (especially touching upon the issue of money exchange) and warnings against pickpockets (especially “wherever there are too many people in one place like in public transportation” and in taxi cabs).

My analysis has confirmed that a critical approach to the seemingly unquestionable slogan “Zachor! Remember!” is needed. It indicated that “peeling of the onion” is not appropriate in situations when the sample studied does not encompass the full spectrum of a given setting but only a bigger or smaller part of it. Mechanical application of the method results in an incomplete and hence simplified picture of the past of the Jewish community and city in which it lived. Therefore, another approach suggests itself – that of “rolling the onion up.” In further considerations of this topic, one should take into account the fact that the Holocaust changed the map of Slovak Jewry (including that of Bratislava). It mostly impacted on its geographic structure. Many perished, others emigrated. They were replaced by Jewish newcomers from the countryside. The recent tragedy was reflected in their rejection of Judaism; they lacked an affinity to the city and its history. Consequences of the Holocaust also reprogrammed the memory of the community, its institutions and its members. Once-leading currents ceased to exist or lost their influence and once-marginal segments moved into the center of memory. It can be said that in Bratislava after 1945 secular Jews with leftist orientation, whose ideas corresponded with the general climate of the period, prevailed. The public, but also some experts have accepted as a fact that currently important parts of the community also played an equally important role in the interwar period. Their interpretations have become the leading and even the only perspective not only on the present, but also on the Jewish community of the interwar period.

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