

Why Don't They Participate?

A Short Voyage into the Hearts, Minds and Concerns of the Jews of Subotica, Yugoslavia

By Sara Stojković



The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
Bar Ilan University - Faculty of Jewish Studies
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Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality is an independent R & D center, founded in Bar-Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives open to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America.

To dismiss such subjective disaffection with Jewishness as merely a result of poor marketing and amateurish PR for Judaism is an easy way out – which we do not accept. Rather, a concurrent working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is, that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness reflects real flaws and weaknesses existing in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

The first stage of all research projects of our Center is, therefore, to analyze an aspect or institution of Jewish life in order to identify and understand what might be contributing to “turning Jews off”. However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, to characterizing and formulating options for mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

The Rappaport Center views the Jewish People as a global community made up of a large number of nodes that link and interconnect in multiple and complex ways. Recognizing and respecting the wide variety of contexts and aspects of Jewish life today, we realize that insights and solutions relevant to specific communities and institutions are not necessarily directly applicable elsewhere. Yet the interconnectivity of Jews worldwide, enhanced by modern modes of communication, means that novel analyses and responses to problems and issues facing specific Jewish frameworks are of more than local significance. Thus, work carried out at our center can be of benefit to all leaders, activists and

institutions motivated – as we are here at the Rappaport Center – to respond creatively to the challenges of assimilation and to enhance and strengthen Jewish vitality.

The Rappaport Center publishes a series titled “Research and Position Papers”, authored by outstanding scholars and experts. These papers present original and interesting findings concerning issues pertaining to assimilation and Jewish identity. Written at a high level of cultural and conceptual analysis, they are nevertheless not ‘ivory tower’ research; they bear operational implications for ameliorating and improving real-life situations. The research and position papers of the Rappaport Center are an invaluable and original series, and constitute a significant addition to the collection of any public and research library and to the bookshelves of all individuals interested in, or concerned with, the future of the Jewish people.

A second series of publications is titled “Field Reports”. These provide insights and information with regard to specific issues of Jewish life, and give a voice to local community members addressing those issues in a straightforward manner.

We are pleased to present the third publication in this series:

• **WHY DON'T THEY PARTICIPATE? A SHORT VOYAGE INTO THE HEARTS, MINDS AND CONCERNS OF THE JEWS OF SUBOTICA, YUGOSLAVIA,**
by Sara Stojković

Ms. Stojković provides us with a poignant account of the current condition of Jewish life in her home-town, set against the story of the community over the course of the 20th century. Her integration of interviews with community members together with her own personal insights and recollections create a fascinating window into the community’s situation, dilemmas, hopes and prospects. While her report deals with one small, specific locale, it has broader implications; as she writes:

Set in a unique historical and geographical environment, I believe that the Jewish community of Subotica tells a story common to many other post-socialist settings, especially the ones placed in the realm of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

With Ms. Stojković, we, too, believe that the insights expressed in this publication can motivate Jewish communities and leaders to take a new look at the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which they have until now related to community life – and encourage them to seriously consider and implement new strategies, better suited to ensuring the future of this ancient people in today’s turbulent times.

* * *

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this report by Sara Stojković: Ms. Iris Aaron, organizational coordinator of the Rappaport center, who also took after proofreading and coordinating with press; Ms. Denise Levin (text editor); the Ben Gassner studio (cover graphics), and Art Plus press.

For all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed for all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, the publication of this report is an opportunity to acknowledge once again the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality



Things we used to know

In my childhood memory of the Jewish community of Subotica two major Jewish holidays were Hanukkah and Purim. Those were the only two nights throughout the year when most of the approximately 220 members would sit together enjoying dinner and mutual company. The whole event would start with a short service in the synagogue attended by a few of the members, followed by a children's and youth performance (relating to the history of the holiday, or simply a play by Ephraim Kishon), and so the laughter and voices would continue in the main hall deep into the night. Those were the only occasions on which I felt what I thought of as the "true" purpose of our community, to have been achieved. That, for me, was Judaism.

Although my interests and need of knowledge widened and deepened, I never have lost my appreciation for those community dinners and the feeling of closeness that characterized them. What we shared was the warm metamorphosis of a family feeling, a notion perhaps not foreign to any Jewish community around the world. But after those years, the atmosphere slowly changed, moulded by a number of outside influences as it is often the case, and gradually more and more dinner seats were empty. Members of my community became separated from each other in search for – or because of their individual interests. Some blamed the community leadership for not providing what they believed to be adequate substance or sustenance for their Jewish existence, and other's gave no explanation at all. And this is where in a way it also ended for me. The community I once had was now lost. It did not fill the needs of my Jewish identity in a satisfying way, so instead of engaging myself I looked for it elsewhere. But my greatest mistake was the naivety with which I judged, or better yet misjudged the situation.

What I did not realise back then was that the problems my community was experiencing were not as insignificant and trivial as they seemed to me. So what if 100 Jews somewhere in Europe decided to stop attending community dinners? Did that really influence their Jewish identity? Did that really influence anything at all?

What I lacked was perspective. I thought there was not much that could or should be done, but as I gave it second thought, I realised that there might be a lot more there once you scratched the surface.

What is it that turns Jews away from Judaism? What significant role do Jewish Communities play in the issue? And of what importance can issues of a small-town community be to a global perspective?

Set in a unique historical and geographical environment, I believe that the Jewish community of Subotica tells a story common to many other post-socialist settings, especially the ones placed in the realm of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. For the sake of understanding and strengthening this claim, I turned to history and especially the work of István Iványi, who wrote extensively on the history of Subotica up until the 19th century, hoping to learn more about the society that raised and built this Jewish community as I knew it. For the period from the end of 19th century up until the 2nd World War I used a number of essays (mostly published by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia) and recollections of the members of the community. Thorough research on the issue has also been done by the members of the “post-war generation”, many of whom actively contributed to the work and progress of the Jewish community. What follows is a brief overview of the events that shaped the present, before we can turn to the present day per se and its issues and opinions.

The unexpected role of Eugene of Savoie on the Jewish life worldwide

In order to comprehend all of the circumstances that led to the current problems that Jewish communities face, one needs turn back to their roots. That is also the case with Subotica. Even a short glance upon its cultural and political history will offer us understanding of its present difficulties and perhaps suggest a key to preventing future ones. Now we shall set the stage in order to look at the historical facts that led and shaped the ground for the fifty year period most determining for this reality.

The defining moment for Jewish migration in these lowland regions of South-East Europe came in the shape of victory over the Turks, won by Eugene of Savoie in 1697. As was common practice in the Austro-Hungarian empire and throughout Europe, Jews that came to the region were not granted status of free citizens up until 1764 when Subotica received the rank of a “Free King's City”. Towards the end of the 18th century regular Jewish life firmly emerged in the town, with one Salamon Hajduschka receiving a permit for permanent residence and, soon after, consent from the municipality to build a synagogue together with other arriving families.

Nevertheless, the general atmosphere was not very favourable towards Jews. Even though they were under the protection of Austro-Hungarian laws, hostility threatening to turn into anti-Semitism was very much present. But it is most important to take a moment and explain the origin of such feelings and not rush into common classifications.

Despite the fact that Subotica was situated on the crossroad of major trading routes connecting the rest of Europe with the Balkans and the Orient, the economic situation of the common people and most of the merchants was very poor. Because of that any newcomer with trade or a craft at hand would be looked upon as a threat to the “natives” subsistence. This further led to an appeal of the local craftsmen and merchants that “no other Serbs, Germans, Jews and Gypsies may be admitted to the town”.¹ But as time passed and the municipality and the region gradually developed, so did the heads of Subotica find a role for Jews in their society. Work on the synagogue was finally completed at the beginning of the 19th century, and by then the Jewish community started its work, and there is also evidence of the presence of a Jewish school.

The promising light of the Hungarian revolution

Without going into too much detail and getting lost in the midst of all the historical data, it is still significant to shortly explain the general ambience that presided over the region for the following decades, influencing all aspects of life, including Jewish.

As the internal dissatisfaction all over the Austro-Hungarian world increased, it left its marks on the border town of Subotica as well. For quite some time the rule of the city was thrown from one hand to another, through different policies, regulations and influences. This sort of instability continued until the end of the 1st world war, and continued after it, albeit having changed in its outward appearance, and seeming a bit more “civilised”. Such a turbulent setting obviously had a huge impact on general society and the economic situation, an impact that again lead to internal mood changes often mostly felt by Jewish residents. Because of their religion and despite their social position (that was steadily improving), they were secluded from public life. They were tolerated, but not yet accepted. This naturally led to the strengthening and institutionalising

¹ István Iványi, Szabadka szabad király város története (The History of the Free King's City of Subotica), part I published in Subotica, 1886; part II published in Subotica, 1892

of the Jewish community as the primary source of security, support and comfort for its members.

But as the world approached the 19th century, enlightening and liberating tendencies made their mark in all of Europe's corners, even the most remote ones. The winds of positive change and dreams of better citizenship built upon many years of dissatisfaction awakened a new yearning among the underprivileged classes in the region. The sweet promises of emancipation threatened for a moment to lead the Jews of Subotica into complete assimilation. It was a step they willingly took for the sake of freeing themselves from the rank of lower-class citizens, hoping to finally be able to build their status and lives as equals.

Many of the Jews found affirmation of such ideals in the Hungarian revolution and were left disappointed when after its end they were still puppets on a string in the hands of a sometimes-ruthless maestro. The world changed, but so did the feelings between the members of the Jewish community themselves. There were those strongly opposing emancipation, fearing (somewhat rightfully) it would lead to a complete loss of their Jewish identity, on one side, and the ones desiring better opportunities for their "civil" life on the other.² These conflicting views were only the beginning of an avalanche that tore apart the Jewish community and moreover somewhat alienated certain individuals from Judaism.

The world we cannot forget

The end of 1918 and the soon finalized status of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia encompassing inside of its borders the city of Subotica as its most northern point brought yet another fresh setting for the Jews in the region. In this newly established democratically-leaning country, Jews received the title of "Serbians of the faith of Moses" – a designation most of them valued very highly. And though it seemed that this rank at last defined their belonging, the signs of their recent pro-Hungarian feelings and yearnings were still visible, adding up to difficult identity and political issues.

In response to these changes in the environment, a couple of members of the Jewish community of Subotica decided upon establishing an "Orthodox Religious Society". Starting with only 32 members, it soon enough grew into

² One of the examples of such internal tensions can be seen in an appeal sent out by the Jewish community asking for court fines against those Jews who continue trading during Jewish holidays.

one of the largest Orthodox communities in Yugoslavia, and in 1929 state laws sanctioned two types of Jewish communities inside its borders: Neologic and Orthodox. In the case of Subotica, the two communities continued working together towards the construction of a rich and vibrant Jewish society.

The Jewish community of Subotica finally reached the position it longed for in between the two world wars. During the 1930s, at the height of its prosperity, it was the 4th largest community in Yugoslavia comprising 6000 members! 1200 belonged to the orthodox congregation, while the other 4800 were simply part of the “Jewish Religious Institution” of Subotica. Many of the same Jews who had started out as the poorest traders had -- two generations later -- become highly ranked and highly respected industrialists with an active and flourishing community life. This is seen from numerous municipal documents listing the industries in the town, the most influential citizens – out of which a large number belonged to the Jewish community. From various essays written for the federation of Jewish Communities and from recollections of community members we learn about the rich cultural and educational Jewish life at that time.

Apart from the Jewish school (elementary), which comprised all Jewish children, regardless of community affiliation, there were numerous educational, cultural and charitable institutions. Judita³ remembers: “Before the 2nd World War all of the larger communities had Jewish youth movements in which young people aged 10 to 25 learned about Judaism and Zionism, were taught Hebrew and Israeli folk dances... we were all together”.

The Orthodox community ran the following organisations: “Talmud Torah” – a special religious school with around 40 students; “Yeshiva” – for higher levels of Talmud study and intermediate aged students; “Menora” – a group for the increase of knowledge of Jewish literature and work on the development of Palestine; “Hevra Shass” – for the advanced study of Talmud, one hour per day; “Bikur Holim”, “Hevra Tzedoka” – general charitable societies. Apart from these, the Jewish community of Subotica also supported sport associations; “Heder” – open school for the study of Judaism and Hebrew language; youth associations such as “Ken” and “HaShomer Hatza'ir” – sharing Zionist ideas, general Jewish education, teaching Hebrew and Yiddish as well as involving participants in voluntary charity work.⁴

3 NB – Names are fictitious.

4 Jewish Almanac, Dusan Jelic, 1987, Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia.

Old wounds seemed to be healing. The Hungarian majority lived side by side with the growing Serbian population with a common dream of a united Yugoslavia. Thus the Jews of Subotica became integrated members of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-confessional society that enabled them to celebrate their identity through a vibrant community.

The world difficult to accept

Three quarters of the Jewish Community of Subotica perished during the Shoah. 4000 people were either killed in town and in neighbouring places, or sent to labour and concentration camps and never returned. There was hardly a person who did not lose most, if not all, of his/her family and friends. The Jewish community failed to account for more than 2800 individuals, whose fate remains unknown. There was no going back to the Jewish life that had existed before the war. The catastrophe of the 1940s brought about a much greater need for a sense of closeness and community between the surviving members, and contributed to the growth of a strong desire for 'aliyah' to the newly established state of Israel. Led by their pre-war Zionism and the horrors they had experienced, 800 of the remaining 1200 Jews left Subotica for Israel at the first opportunity for 'aliyah', so that by 1964 there were only 363 Jews still listed. Few of those had not lost their belief in Judaism.

This small community that remained in Subotica believed in a brighter future. After the Nazi-Hungarian occupation and the fall of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a new ideal arose waving the flags of socialism and communism. There were a lot of promises, but mostly for an expensive price, so that the generation that remained faced a difficult choice – to continue living as members of the Jewish community or to assimilate in a way that could lead to success in the Communist hierarchy? This remained the predominant debate in Jewish circles, widely discussed and mostly attacked at conferences, meetings and in Jewish regional journals.

The liberated Yugoslavia brought on the definition of "moral and political adequacy", a rank that became indispensable for filling any civil position. Still haunted by the terrors they had so closely escaped, many of the Jews felt a new surge of insecurity, seeing assimilation as the only mean of survival. So it came about that many of the Jews decided to succumb to the ruling regime at the price of their identity. A large number of mixed marriages occurred after the war, partly also as a result of the diminished community, and soon after there was a new generation of young adults with huge identity crises. It would take many years until these people would (sometimes even accidentally) find out

about their Jewish background that had been kept secret from them all their lives. Some decided to act upon it, while others felt it an unnecessary remnant of the past. The ones who were raised in a strong Jewish atmosphere or later accepted the Zionist ideals either left for Israel, or stayed behind. And what remained for them here? There were only traces now of what had been an important Jewish centre ten years prior. The community fought for its survival, struggling to maintain its life and traditions as well as it could.

The intensity of these efforts and the level of spirit can best be described through the words of Dr. Albert Vajs⁵ (Weiss) in his letter to the Yugoslavian “Jewish Almanac” 1955-1956. “Having all of this in mind, one could still say that our remaining, small community is no “withered branch”, but a living and vibrant part of Yugoslav and Jewish reality today and for the future. (...) Skilled by the tragedy it survived and the dynamics of its rebirth, the community continually tries and succeeds in cultivating ‘the art of living as a Jew’ under its unique conditions”.

These unique conditions were the ones that have determined the new Jewish existence until today. The remaining generation that held on to the old ways after the 2nd world war gradually passed away so as the '70s approached, there were no more signs of religious life in Subotica. The orthodox synagogue and the ‘mikveh’ were destroyed, there were no more religious services held, no one to take care of ‘kashrut’, there were neither religious weddings nor funerals⁶ and the diminishing community deeded the great synagogue built at the beginning of the century to the municipality for cultural purposes.

The balancing act

Judaism became an individual characteristic almost equal in its importance to general society to vegetarianism. Most of the Jews in Subotica agree that it was an undesirable yet tolerated feature, at least most of the time. The socialist country had only one religion – and that was the ruling communist party. Those that decided upon staying true to their identity (especially in the northern – multi-cultural region) usually had to keep a low profile or at least be constantly

5 Dr. Weiss was the Dean of the Law Faculty at the Belgrade University as well as the president of the Federation of the Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia.

6 The last wedding performed at the great synagogue was that of Palo and Judita (Judith) Szendrey on the 31st of August 1947.

aware of possible implications. Those that did stay true to the Jewish identity saw the passing on of Jewish traditions to their children as the only way of maintaining and building their identity. The Holocaust became the pillar of this newly-modelled identity of the post-war generations, and Judaism itself turned into a religion of remembrance – what it used to be like, what we used to have, who we used to be. Fighting to keep the memory of Jewish life and tradition alive, to keep the memory of the world they had known and their loved ones, Judaism became a memory struggling against its own extinction.

“The key of its (community’s) success lies first and foremost in its core inner unity which has not been seriously disturbed from the time of the Liberation⁷ up to today. That unity is its most valuable after-war treasure. It would not be made possible without harmony with the main unison of the contemporary Yugoslav environment as well as the adjustment to the progressive common-Jewish tendencies. It should remain the most important line of direction for our work in the following decade”. The words of Dr. Weiss came true. Unity did remain the most important direction but it was too often the only one.

The ways and reasons

As the last decade of the 20th century approached, the vision of a great socialist Yugoslavia broke into a million pieces, changing the lives of all of its inhabitants alike. War, an unbearable economic situation, political games and treacheries pressured society, influencing the Jewish community as well, dividing its members as never before.

These new currents brought about a completely new concept of Jewishness. Many people, in need of material assistance and/or the sense of community they sorely missed, suddenly arose to reclaim Jewish identity. Marija says: “There was a change in the behaviour of members of the community following the Shoah. Religious life was mostly extinguished under communism, and interest in Judaism itself slowly disappeared. The community remained strong only for the sake of benefits – usually material (help), or just for socialising, and all of a sudden this large number of New Jews appeared out of nowhere”.

The Jewish Community of Subotica was more than happy to open its doors to those newly-declared Jews, but the positive results of this action are quite

7 From the end of the 2nd World War.

debatable. The community centre acted as a meeting point for the masses only at times when humanitarian aid arrived. There were very few individuals and families that, once registered in the community, stayed to share in the Jewish activities. For most of the “newcomers”, Jewishness was simply a means of survival. This sort of attitude started to undermine the whole existence of the community, threatening to extinguish what little was still left of Jewish traditions. Many were against this, hurt by what they saw as the utmost neglect of Judaism, especially since even the non-Jewish spouses were being admitted as members but only for the sake of the benefits it might bring individuals and families.

And as in every society, there were those that approved, and those that opposed. The mask of unity was still on, but underneath it, community discord grew into an abyss. As one of the eldest community members observed: “It was and still is personal gain that brings these people into the community, and that is not what the goal of a Jewish community should be!”

Another member, in his mid 50s, shares the feelings: “All of the new membership is here only because of advantages they enjoy, using the community for inadequate purposes”. To what extent this is true may be debatable, but to a certain extent it is strongly agreed upon by the majority of “old members”. That familiar feeling that held the community together turned very cold gradually, and in the midst of all the troubles only a few seemed (to be able) to care about Judaism per se.

Considering current reality from the point of collective identity for which the old Jewish Subotica was just a day away, with thousands of its members filling up the great synagogue for the high Holidays, or all of the familiar faces from the school rows and street corners and the abundance of Jewish activities; a difficult question arises: why don't we participate in... – what? When there is nothing left...

The Gordian knot

And so we come to present day. I was interested in finding out if it was only the sentimentality of old days and old ways that held people of both the pre-and-post-war generations away from the community, or perhaps something more? So I decided to embark upon what has proved to be quite a demanding journey of getting in touch with those people who grew up and within the Jewish community but became separated somewhere along the way, over the last

decades. The trouble was that one of the ways this Judaism-related apathy is shown is in the reluctance with which all similar types of research in the past ten years have been met. As I was told by a former head of the cultural board of the community, on three occasions opinion polls were carried out during this period, and each time the response was more than disappointing. Out of 200 members listed on paper, around 50 were actively involved in some way at any given period of time, but there were only between 5 to 10 responses to the questionnaires and inquiries. Therefore, the leadership of the community at the time these researches were under way, analyzed the situation as they saw it, even in the absence of quantitative evidence. And it was not a bright picture. Very few people had interest in anything concerning the Jewish community, whether with regard to financial and/or material help or to occasional social gatherings. Getting a 'minyan' for a Shabbat service was most often a real struggle. It seemed to the leadership that people did not care.

But I was anxious to find out for myself, so I turned to sending out questionnaires and arranging interviews. Knowing what to expect, especially bearing in mind that my target group was considerably smaller, I was pleasantly surprised when I managed to get the critical mass of 22 responses to my questions. Using old phone lists, I succeeded in getting in contact with many of the members who had been quite isolated for the past couple of years. Not wishing to hopelessly overwhelm them, and hoping to get concrete results, I constructed a simple questionnaire of 8 questions, 6 of which were to be answered by choosing the relevant degree of the truth (or otherwise) of statements and opinions. The following is the overview of the questions:

1. How well are you informed about the events and programmes of your Jewish community?
2. How often do you visit and take part in events at the JC?
3. How satisfied are you with the programme itself? (trying to get as objective an overview as possible)
4. Of what importance for you personally, are:
 - religious life and holidays
 - cultural events (Jewish culture)
 - lectures/events on Judaism, Jewish history and thought
 - social-informal gatherings
5. How appropriate, in your opinion, is the frequency of events concerning:
 - religious life
 - cultural events

- lectures/events on Judaism, Jewish history and thought
 - social–informal gatherings
6. In your opinion, what should be (out of the four aspects mentioned earlier) and at what level, the priorities of a Jewish community? And do they need more care and thought?
 7. What is it that ties you the most to the Jewish community? (open-ended answer)
 8. Is there anything else you might like to add that has not been mentioned by this questionnaire?

As I approached this research, somewhat unconsciously I already had two major assumptions: first, that no one will be willing to talk and answer me, and second, that even if they do, their answers will only confirm what I so naively thought I already knew – that Jews in Subotica have no interest in Judaism nor the Jewish aspects of their identity. After a month and a half of research, papers, telephone interviews, I realised how wrong I was.

Not just that there is an overall interest in Judaism, but it exists in such a vibrant and on an individual level I had never hoped to find! All of the participants unanimously agreed that there should be more frequent thought, time and preparation given both to the keeping of the holidays on community level, various cultural events and activities as well as lectures on Judaism, history and thought. To present the results in a technically plausible and understandable way, let us turn to numbers:

- On an overall scale of 1-10, the grades for the amount of interest people show in respective aspects were as follows:
 - Religious life – 7;
 - Cultural activities – 6;
 - Lectures etc. – 7.5;
 - Social gatherings – 4.4
- On the question of priorities of a Jewish community, on a scale of 1-10, results were as follows:
 - Religious life – 7.6;
 - Cultural activities – 8;
 - Lectures etc. – 8.6;
 - Social gatherings – 7

This is what came to me as a surprise – the definite yearning for recovering and rebuilding our Jewish identities from the roots, wanting to be immersed

in Jewish culture and atmosphere, to hear once and once more the words of Judaism. And this has been affirmed to me via individual interviews as well. The majority of the Jews in Subotica feel that after the Shoah and after 50 years under communism, there is not much left for them in Judaism as a practicing religion. There are, however, exceptions, albeit few, but time shall tell. However, what they all feel binds them together is Jewish tradition, shared history, culture and religion – in a secular sense, as it were.

This is also confirmed by the results of the poll covering the question of frequency of events – on the scale of 1-10, 1 being insufficient and 10 more than sufficient, the results were the following:

Religious life – 7

Cultural events/activities – 3.4

Lectures – 2.7

Social gatherings – 4.2

For the question of knowledge of events, on the scale of 1-4, the average grade was 2.4, and as for the second question, i.e. the actual involvement of the person in question, the answers were of the grade 2.1.

The problem here appears to be more one of communication and sharing of information, not only the when and what (of course, those members who use e-mail, as one of the most accurate means of spreading information, such as a detailed monthly programme that circulates around, are the better informed. But for the majority of members who are above 60–70 years of age, the phone is the most accessible, although not as dependable means of contact), but the mere comprehension of all the possibilities presented to and for a Jewish community. Today, Judaism in Subotica is mostly limited to religious services that have no meaning to the majority of Jews brought up in a non-religious environment; cultural manifestations that are usually merely elegies for the world that we lost and commemorations for a culture that used to exist; and community gatherings strictly defined and attended by only those that agree to the specific contents. On the question of satisfaction with the programme of the Jewish community, the overall grade was considerably lower – 1.6 on a scale of 1-4. The Holocaust remained the most usual means of identification. And the majority of members, including the survivors, feel they need something more. And that something – the substance if we might call it so, they find unavailable.

It seems as if we have lost everything else. It seems as if we have forgotten what Judaism is. There are around 230 Jews registered in Subotica today. A lot more dinner seats are empty than when I was a child. Or so I think at least, for I haven't visited one for more than three years, as I moved away from Subotica. For many people, including myself, there is neither the feeling of unity nor much of Judaism left in the community as it is today. The internal turmoil that divided the community left far too deep scars to be mended quickly, and that is also a fact shown by this questionnaire.

I would say that we have taken a wrong step altogether. The community lost its meaning by turning into far too much of an institution, too easily entangled by the traps of bureaucracy and internal politics.

We have had our wake-up call, and I believe that just now we might be both tired enough of it all, and prepared to move on. There is a strong yearning between both the currently active and passive members for a new rebirth of their Jewish identities – or more precisely, a need to go back to what we want for our future. We have seen that there is undeniably a growing interest in Jewish history, philosophy, culture and religion alike, much broader than what is currently offered. But it just needs a little push.

One member of the community observed: "We need the younger members of our community that are less and less present to get more involved, that is what we need. We miss enthusiasts!" And this might be the key.

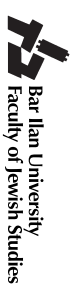
We have looked so deep into ourselves that we lost all of the light from the outside, and we need a little reminder. We need to be aware the past is not the only world we have to live in, and be reminded of what waits for us today. Perhaps if we regain the pillars of Judaism, it might lead us to recovering our community as well. A community, in some form or other, constituting a continuation as well as a start, built upon the remnants of the events that shaped it but moving towards a brighter future

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Why Don't They Participate?

A Short Voyage into the Hearts, Minds and Concerns of the Jews of Subotica, Yugoslavia

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