IMPORTING DIVISIONISM INSTEAD OF DIVERSITY

A Personal Account of Jewish Rebirth in Prague

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Abstract

This personal account of a former Czechoslovak Jewish Youth leader offers insights into the process of searching for Jewish identity and its meaning in post-Communist Czechoslovakia. The author discusses the conceptual struggles faced by his generation, raised during the last two decades of the Communist regime, the impact of imported ideological infighting and factional splits on the makeup of an emerging community, the pop-appeal of Judaism to the Czech masses and the varied reactions of the highly assimilated Czech Jews to the eventual arrival of a dogmatic religious leadership.

My discovery of being Jewish was less painful than that of many members of my generation. I did not come back from school with a viciously anti-Semitic joke the family did not find funny, forcing them to reveal the family secret. For me, this equivalent to coming out was connected to stamp collecting. I was scavenging through my grandmother's old letters and postcards, cutting out all the interesting-looking stamps I could find. Then I found a letter in German and Chinese and was intrigued by it. When trying to discuss the find with my grandma, I was told to put it back and never take it out again. This was out of character for my grandma. A few days later grandpa told me the letter was not a letter – and it was not in Chinese. It was grandma's birth certificate. It was in Hebrew. I was told not to tell anybody otherwise they would come and get me. My grandma was a Jew, and my mum was a Jew too. I cried the whole night, because I knew from school that Jews were bad. Not only were they bad, they were murdering our brothers, the Palestinians, in Lebanon. I was a good Communist kid, an outstanding student. I did not want to be one of them. And suddenly I was. Today I consider that night the night of my bar mitzvah.

Years later, after the fall of Communism, I was told the birth certificate tucked away among the old letters was discovered by my grandpa in one of

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the archives where he was conducting genealogy research. That very copy, originally ordered in 1938, was never delivered to the family, as they did not reside at their address any more, so the copy was returned to the office handling its issuance. My infant mother was baptized and had purely Czech papers by that time, as a refugee from Sudetenland. After escaping the city of Aussig, or Ústí nad Labem, settling on the other side of the country where nobody knew them, the family never applied for any assistance from Jewish institutions helping the refugees, never registered with any Jewish community, despite orders to the contrary. The only food coupons they had were those issued to my grandpa, an Aryan according to the racist Nuremberg laws. Grandpa would talk to me about these things; grandma, never. She lived out the rest of her life fearing that people might find out who she was or her offspring were: Jews.

But what does that word mean, besides the fear? What does being Jewish entail, other than nightmares in the wee hours of the morning that they will come and get me? As with everything in my life, there was a woman involved, who was my friend and classmate in grammar school and secondary school. She worked at that time as a guide at the Old Jewish Cemetery of Prague. As I lived in the very centre of the area where the Jewish Town used to be, we met by chance once in a while. One day she told me to join her for some lecture, or evening, or something Jewish she was going to. And so I went, attracted by her good looks rather than the promise of Jewish awakening. In a private flat I encountered a group of similarly searching souls. There also was an American singing and dancing female rabbi saying things I did not understand, yet they sounded very spiritual, as well as the local organizer of the event – today we would have probably called it a *shabbaton*. The group called itself Beit Simcha. That evening changed my life forever.

The Jewish Community was just across the street from our flat. I ate my lunches there from the age of six, not out of Jewishness, but because these were very cheap warm lunches and my mother did not like cooking. I knew nothing about the people there but for the fact they spoke in heavily accented Czech. Those who chose to talk to the lonely boy eating his child's portion lunch told me they came from the east, from what used to be Czechoslovakia but was then Ukraine. They also told me the meat was no good, because it was not fresh: it was canned meat from Budapest. More than once they gave me some small change to keep coming to eat in the kosher kitchen instead of non-kosher places. I found it all too weird to probe any further. The Beit Simcha crowd was just so much more welcoming and eager to learn – and teach.

Little did I know that Beit Simcha was 'Reform', and the people at the Community were 'Orthodox'. Or that nothing would ever come of my affection for Sylvie, the *shabbaton* organizer. Yet what I knew for sure was that many of us, regulars at Beit Simcha, would be tasting both of these worlds

with no prejudice, no labels and no divisionism. We were all Jews searching for meaning; Jews suddenly free to discover their own identities and learn. We inhaled information from all sides, from all sources available to us. Among other Reform and conservative personalities brought to their events, Beit Simcha organized a few lectures by Rabbi Herschell Gluck, a Chabad rabbi from London whose family was involved in clandestine efforts to maintain Jewish knowledge behind the Iron Curtain during Communist times. He was – and still is – a man of great heart who would never see a problem in crossing the artificial ideological barriers in order to teach Judaism. We were totally blind to the fights between various kinds of Judaism abroad. Or at least I was. The fact that Beit Simcha existed under the patronage of the World Union for Progressive Judaism meant nothing to me. I was so grateful for any knowledge offered.

Once Beit Simcha organized a trip to Vienna, to celebrate the High Holydays with the Reform Community there. There I heard about the divisions for the very first time. The Reform were not recognized by the official Jewish community and celebrated the holidays in a rented space, a beautiful hall filled with images of baroque angels. We, the Czech visitors, even had a discussion among ourselves whether these images should not have been covered, concluding that as long as we were not praying towards them all was fine. On the way back, we stopped at one of the newly opened private restaurants, in what used to be the Czechoslovak borderlands, and ordered the Czech speciality all vegetarians and kosher people know so well – fried cheese. We must have had some discussion about it being kosher or not, for soon after our order the owner of the restaurant, an older, short man with darker features, came up to our table and asked: 'Did you really discuss whether our fried cheese was kosher?' Sylvie, always a person with no fear, told him we were Jews and that is why we had such a discussion. 'I am too', stated the owner with sudden sadness. 'Not even my boys – you see them over there, working the tables – not even they know. You can eat with no worries; I made sure we changed the oil for your cheese and fries. I am so glad to see there are still some Jews here.' This anecdote captures the intensity of the early 1990s for so many of the Czech Jews: wondering whether to come out into the open, admit being Jewish – or continue hiding, probably forever?

The Czech public was always fascinated by the mysterious, often stereotypical image of the Jews. The Maharal, in Czech always called Rabbi Löw, and his creation of the Golem, the artificial man, form an integral part of the romantic Czech national legends. Franz Kafka became another icon of this mystique. In the 1990s, the Jewish presence in Bohemia and Moravia was always referred to in the past tense, as something that disappeared when the Jewish town of Prague was razed at the end of the nineteenth century – or during World War Two; something long gone. The media focus on these

exotic beings that were no more fuelled a rush of interest that gradually turned the local stereotypical image of 'the Jew' upside down. 'The Jew' was not an enemy, a creature alien to the Czech nation, any more, nor was 'the Jew' an evil Zionist conspirator from the Communist propaganda. In the new stereotype, all the Jews were not only successful and rich, but also wise, smart, good and worthy of admiration and imitation. Shortly before the fall of Communism, the pop group Ocean, and later its spin-off called Shalom, brought this fascination with Jews, Kabbalistic symbols and the Star of David to a whole new level. Being Jewish became fashionable, a sort of a pop culture trend. Some thought such a public presence of Jewish symbols was good for the Jews; some thought it was bad for the Jews and especially for authentic Judaism.

We had them at Beit Simcha, too: girls and boys with Stars of David everywhere, changing their names to Sara or Moshe or Rachel to feel interesting, learning Hebrew, loving Israel. Some had complex histories of families hiding their Jewish origins, but many invented truly bizarre stories – that would have made them Jewish if they made any sense – just to be admitted into what was perceived as an exclusive club of the chosen people. It may have been the influx of black-clad Shalomists, fans of the band Shalom, or the urge to look somewhere else that made me gradually leave the Beit Simcha group and immerse myself in the activities of the Czechoslovak Union of Jewish Youth.

Originally started by children of those Jews who had the courage to be Jewish even under Communism, the Youth Union, or just 'the Union', as we called it, was an informal gathering that probably caused a lot of headaches to the official Jewish Community establishment. Those young people who knew nothing, and may not even have been Jewish according to Halakhah, actually demanded things: education, inclusion, participation in community affairs. And they got support from abroad: from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and from émigré groups. The World Union of Jewish Students sent an *arev*, a young Israeli, to provide the Czechoslovak Jewish Youth with some knowledge. The Community leadership, originally so focused on letting Judaism die out peacefully with them as the last generation, accepted the existence of youth and offered, grudgingly, a meeting space for regular Union meetings. There were outings, seminars and summer camps. I became a Jewish Youth leader. Since 1992, I was also an editor of *Chochmes*, the monthly magazine of the Union. Looking back, I have to admit that half of its content was nothing but a thinly veiled dating and gossip service.

The year 1992 brought another big change for Czech Jews. A new rabbi was installed: Karol Sidon, a dissident rabbi with no connections to the dark, Communist past! According to the information we at the Union received, he was one of us, souls searching for meaning; a patrilineal Jew who surely

would understand the issues of people who did not win the lottery of having a Jewish mother, a situation so common in post-Communist Czechoslovakia. This is what I wrote in *Chochmes* at the time:

> I was looking forward to the inauguration, despite the fact it was starting so early in the morning and in such a cold space as the Altneuschul synagogue. After all, this was a big event even for somebody as assimilated as I am. Karol Sidon should, after his inauguration as the rabbi of Prague on November 9, take on the duties of the Land Rabbi of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia as well. . . . When the speeches were over, lunch was served. The fish was too salty and full of bones, but it was shocking to see how much food was left untouched. Maybe because most of the diplomats and important people left by that time and so there was a sudden abundance of lunches. After finishing the food the inauguration was over, and we all could return to our everyday problems. I do believe the new Land Rabbi will be helping us with solving them, by both word and deed.[1]

I could not have been more wrong. Rabbi Sidon proceeded to create an artificial Jewish world of his own personal dreams rather than a functional community for Prague or the whole country. He openly preferred converts with no Jewish background, who would not question anything and would literally adhere to one single interpretation of the laws of the Torah, to students from Jewish families, constantly asking questions and insistent on maintaining the multifaceted identity they had grown up with. For Sidon and his followers, aggressive showing off of one's strictly Orthodox religiosity took precedence over everything else. Some of the converts would engage in an unspoken but fierce contest of who was more observant, patronizing and harassing the majority of the then active Community members in the process.

> I feel more and more in my Jewish Youth leader role like somebody who has been dating an ugly, silly and bad girl for over a year, yet is unable to break up. For one can always find something positive in her. Here and there, she looks beautiful in the evening dark after a bottle of vodka, sometimes I am glad she actually knows of Forefather Czech,[2] and once in a while I am flooded by happiness realizing she did not beat me up in the evening before we went to sleep. And this girl is our current Czechoslovak Jewish identity.

Thus started my one and only Zionist article for *Chochmes*, advocating immediate aliyah, for the sake of not passing on the diaspora traumas of our parents and grandparents to a new generation. The text was rebuked by more mature Union members as a collection of phrases and propagandistic nonsense; they argued that we do not have to decide where to live and stay for life. We can be happy anywhere we like it, and go anywhere else when we stop liking it. We do not have to face such tough choices as our parents had to. We are free. And everything else is just excuses and laziness.

I have had a religious episode too. There was a time when I had *peyot* and wore *tsitsit* and came to the Altneuschul every morning to lay tefillin. After the prayers, we learned. Our teachers were elderly men from Ruthenia, who grew up in traditional, Yiddish-speaking families of the easternmost province of Czechoslovakia and migrated to Bohemia after the war. Mr Grünberger was the principal teacher, painfully aware of what was happening with the Community under Sidon's leadership. He clung with great hope to every person who shared the authentic need to question the traditions, questing for an identity with all the sentiments, fears and anxieties he himself had to struggle with. Cantor Feuerlicht loved using my doubled surname to call me to the Torah: he would always explode in mischievous laughter, once calling me up as the *Schmock Schmock*. These men were observant, but inside, not for the outward show, as was so often the case with the newcomer converts. They had no problem with the patrilineal Jews or those who learned to call themselves Reform. They often broke the rules themselves, took the underground to get home from the Shabbat services, not insisting on every piece of food having a kosher stamp of approval. Only today, thinking back, can I imagine the pain they dealt with while losing the youth from Jewish families to those coming with no past or family baggage attached. I still miss them and their casual authenticity.

Sidon's drive to create an exclusively Orthodox community against the wishes of the majority of Jews living in the city of Prague and in the Czech Republic as a whole was not the first such attempt. In the immediate post-war period, some of the migrants from Ruthenia apparently entertained similar ideas of getting rid of the Czech 'non-Jewish Jews'. Rabbi Samuel Freilich, acting as their official representative up until the Communist takeover, wrote in his memoirs:

> The revival of traditional Jewish life in Bohemia and Moravia offended the assimilated Czechoslovak Jews in Prague, who regarded this development as signifying the re-emergence of a ghetto culture. The assimilated Jews even considered ways of getting rid of these unwanted newcomers. When I realized the gravity of this situation, I warned the president of Prague's assimilated Jewish community that in a short time we Carpathian Jews would take over the leadership of the entire community. This was no idle threat.

He added a few statements that simply were not true, such as that it was only after the arrival of his religious brethren that 'kosher meat slaughtering was introduced into Bohemia and Moravia, where the practice had been unknown for almost a hundred years. Synagogues, ritual baths and religious schools were built, and functionaries, including rabbis, were hired.'[3]

Due to Sidon's Orthodoxy and unwelcoming nature of the official Jewish Community, traditionally the one and only representative of all the Jews in the land vis-à-vis the state authorities, Prague became the playground of all kinds

of rabbis from all over the world who would use the claims of oppression and inaccessibility of ritual services to all for their own fundraising efforts in the West. Yet even these, often purely monetary-gain-inspired, expat chimeras of a congregation, kept splintering, with each branch of western Judaism vying to establish an official presence in the city, hunting for the few actively Jewish inhabitants left. By the year 2000, I liked to shock the visiting tourists by telling them we had more rabbis then Jews in Prague. The feelings of alienation and mutual hatred between the groupings kept building up, until it finally blew up in a true war of the Jews, masquerading as a conflict between those labelling themselves as Orthodox and those who used labels such as Reform, Liberal or Conservative. In reality, it was all about personal frustrations and envy, often suppressed since the fall of Communism; about hunger for power – and the Community wealth. The fact that the Chabad movement represented the Reform side in this dirty battle speaks for it all. Slanders and vicious personal attacks were rife, and the levels of anti-Semitic rhetoric in discussions started after the story of the inter-Jewish feuding reached the general press were shocking. In the end nobody gained and everybody lost.

Rabbi Sidon, the core of the problem, a self-centred man whose actions were dictated by rabbis in Israel with no understanding or empathy for the local situation in Prague, remained in all of his positions, his attitude and approaches virtually unchanged. The Orthodox minority continued forcing the traditions so alien to the locals onto the majority. Liberal congregations came out of the fight strengthened. The fact that Beit Simcha was always ready to welcome lecturers from other ideological streams, such as Conservative and Orthodox rabbis, including Sidon and his disciples, may have played a significant role, as this open policy attracted many demotivated and angry Community members who refused to deny their own identities by picking just one side. Conservative conversions with Rabbi Hoffberg became a possibility for many patrilineal Jews. A young man started studying in Germany in order to become the first Czech Reform rabbi from a Jewish family. The Jewish school situation, which was one of the triggers of the conflict, finally stabilized and new generation of students started their journey of learning what it means to be Jewish. Unfortunately, many of the slanders spewed by both sides of the conflict stayed with us and took on a life of their own. The week when the Chabad movement tried to take over the Altneuschul synagogue entered local Jewish history as the second moment when regular services were discontinued there: the only other such instance was during the Holocaust.

Years passed. A new, young rabbi even more strict then Sidon became the chief rabbi of Prague. Meanwhile, many of Sidon's Orthodox creations are not Jewish any more, often having returned to their original religious identities, living as generic Czechs with an exotic Jewish episode spicing up their past. Some went to Israel, some dropped out after failed marriages of convenience,

in which they forced themselves to create religious homes that were based on a pipe dream rather than a real identity. But others form the current leadership of the Jewish Community of Prague. At Limmud 2015, the old claims of not even being Jewish were hurled at a new generation of youth from Jewish families, twenty-six years after the fall of Communism. The inferiority complex of some of the converts leads them to rigidity worthy of the most sectarian Jewish sects, while most Czech Jews want to have nothing in common with such a Community, often opting out of being involved in any way. While they are sick and tired of the constant fight with orthodox dogmas brought in from abroad, they also feel alienated by the hatred so often expressed by the equally imported anti-orthodox movements. They just want to be Czech Jews, unaffiliated, unregistered, living their Jewish traditions in private, for themselves, not for show.

So, what came out of my search for the meaning of being Jewish? I can pretend I read Hebrew really fast. I can live in a very observant home. I know what should and must not be done, yet I do not get upset in a secular home where nothing is observed. I have observant friends and non-observant ones, and we all feel well together. I have glass plates and a stock of kosher meat and pots so that I could host them all. I respect the non-Jewish wives of my friends who refused to dump their own identities for the sake of the religiosity game as an integral part of their families. I love my convert friends who are not using Judaism and religiosity as a stick with which to beat others. We meet at various events. Among ourselves, friends and acquaintances from the old Beit Simcha and Union days, we are all one family, despite all the imported divisions and externally forced hatreds. Unlike the vast majority of current members of the Community, we actually do have something in common: shared values and a shared past, including memories of the time of bitter infighting where we often stood on opposing sides. We are a true community both within and outside the official Jewish Community. We are who we are. We decided we want to be together, as diverse as we are. It is fine to be varied and keep searching, never stopping the questions. Most importantly, we do not need any organization, affiliation or label for anything that we decide to do together. We are Czech Jews. And we are proud of that.

Notes

1. *Chochmes* (the monthly magazine of the Czechoslovak Union of Jewish Youth) 1, no. 3, p. 10.
2. Forefather Czech is a mythical leader figure who is said to have brought the Czechs into their homeland, also known by the Latin name Bohemus.
3. *The Coldest Winter: The Holocaust Memoirs of Rabbi Samuel Freilich*, New York 1988, pp. 83–84.