More Than Rememb

Neither the Holocaust nor communism could wipe out the Jews of Eastern Europe. Now

FAITH REBORN In Berlin, once the heartland of Nazism, a new generation of Jewish children is thriving amid the rituals of such festivals as Purim at synag

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EDWARD SEROTTA FOR TIME

Purim ... at synagogues like this one in Pestalozzi Street

By JAMES O. JACKSON

He shall reconcile fathers with sons and sons with their fathers.
—The Book of Malachi

EVEN A BIBLICAL PROPHET COULD not have foreseen the cataclysms the 20th century would visit on the Chosen People. The Jews of Europe would come close to extinction in the Nazi Holocaust. Many of the traumatized survivors would be repressed and secularized by more than four decades of communism. The fathers would be forced to turn away from their faith, and their children would grow up in ignorance of it.

For all that, Malachi's prophecy is coming true. Fifty years ago last week, the Soviets opened the gates of Auschwitz, the Third Reich's most heinously efficient death camp, and discovered the full horror of Hitler's Final Solution. Yet today Jewish identity in Central Europe is taking root in the very soil on which the vast majority of the 6 million perished. The young are discovering their Jewish heritage. And they, in confirmation of the prophecy, are bringing Judaism back to the parents whose faith had been so ruthlessly stamped out by one dictatorship after another for a half-century.

In Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, Moscow, Bratislava, Berlin, in hundreds of towns and villages from the Baltic to the Black Sea, Jewish communities are re-emerging and coming together in a kind of Continental minyan, the quorum required for the holding of religious services. Synagogues and schools are rising again, some on the foundations of Jewish institutions dating from the Middle Ages. Jews are proudly calling themselves Jews once more, reviving traditions and cultures long buried in the ashes of Hitler's ovens. "That now there is the possibility to be a Jew is mystical," says 18-year-old Igor Czernikow, one of the founders of a Jewish youth club in Wroclaw in Poland's Silesia. "It's a historic change, in the history of our nation and the history of the individual."

The regrowth of Judaism is not unprecedented. The Jews of Persia survived the violence under the regime of Ahasuerus, the Jews of Europe outlasted the Inquisition, and pogroms failed to wipe out the Jews of the Russian Empire. Yet cruel as generations of persecutions were, all stopped short of the Nazi attempt at genocide. There were 8.3 million Jews in Eastern and Central Europe before the rise of Hitler. Some 450,000 fled the Nazis before World War II. More than 5 million died in the Holocaust. After the war a few hundred thousand of the survivors left immediately for Israel, Western Europe or the U.S.; an additional 265,000 managed to emigrate from the Soviet Union between the mid-'60s and the early '80s; and still more headed West when communism collapsed in 1989.

Left behind in the former heartland of European Jewry were 2 million, the dim shadow of a once vibrant community. Many were the elderly who could not face or afford the rigors of emigration. But most were the assimilated children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren—generations so thoroughly absorbed and secularized that their Jewishness seemed to consist of little more than distinctive surnames and distant memories.

Yet since the Iron Curtain was lifted and communism banished from the Soviet bloc, the lost generations are being found. Renewed interest in Judaism is part of a broad search for spirituality that has sprung up in the desert created by the demise of a discredited ideology. "People are coming out of the woodwork and announcing they are Jewish," says David Lerner, a British educator who helped found a Sabbath school in Minsk. "Six years ago, Jews were still being beaten up in Minsk. Now there are three religious congregations, the Sabbath school, a youth movement and a voluntary welfare organization."

It is the young, especially, who are discovering their Jewishness. "In the very place where the Nazis created Auschwitz, we have young Jews trying to reclaim their heritage," said Rabbi Michael Schudrich of the American Lauder foundation as he opened the latest youth center last week in Cracow, Poland. "Many did not even know five years ago that they were Jewish." In Budapest the 118-year-old Rabbinical Seminary, the only one in Eastern Europe, is training a new generation of religious leaders for Hungary. One young believer is student Rafael Röhrig, 27, who says he came from an orthodox family—orthodox communist, that is. "It wasn't until I traveled to America and Israel that I met Jews who dedicated their lives to God," he says. "That was something none of us had seen in Hungary. We had to leave to find it."

Now some of the younger Jews are drawing their elders back to the faith. "My parents never had a special religious attitude before," says Zoltan Radanyi, 21, who is studying at the Budapest Pedagogium, an institution allied with the seminary, to become a religion teacher. "They read every book I read in class. When we go to synagogue together, I often advise my father on what scripture to read."

The Budapest seminary building now houses the Anne Frank High School, a 76-year-old institution that taught more than 1,000 students a year before the German Occupation. The Nazis turned the high school's original building into a military hospital in 1944, and during the commu-

nist era, the authorities took it over as an ordinary state school. The few remaining Jewish students moved into the seminary. In 1962 only two Jewish students graduated, and the school came close to shutting down. But it endured, changed its name to honor the Dutch schoolgirl-diarist murdered by the Nazis, and is now jammed to capacity with 200 students who get lessons in Hebrew, Jewish history and Bible study as well as regular subjects. They came to Anne Frank, says director Rozsa Berend, "because they wanted to be Jewish."

The past few years have seen a surge of interest in Judaism among non-Jews as well, especially in the countries with the smallest surviving Jewish communities: Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany.

Jews are proudly calling themselves Jews once more, reviv

"In this country if you're Jewish, everybody loves you," says Sylvie Wittmann, a tour guide who takes groups through Josefov, the old Jewish quarter of Prague. "They think you're Franz Kafka."

Jan Rott, 73, a Prague architect and writer, is astonished at the revival. "For 50 years only a few circumcisions were done here," he says. "It was difficult to gather the 10 men required to hold Sabbath prayers." Now Prague's Altneu Schul, the main synagogue, holds services daily, and three study groups meet weekly to explore Jewish religion and culture. "My grandchildren," says Rott, "know more about being Jewish than my children do."

ALTHOUGH PRAGUE'S JEWISH community is minuscule—numbers range from the officially registered 1,400 up to an estimated 3,000—hundreds more are showing an interest in finding Jewish roots or, for those who have none, in converting. At Beit Simcha, or House of Joy, a Jewish cultural center founded by Wittmann, as many as 200 young people turn up for holidays or social gatherings. It is impossible, she says, to know how many are actually Jews. "Most of the young people don't have any Jewish background," she says. "What they know comes from reading magazines."

Even more remarkable is Poland's renewed interest in Judaism, despite the fact that very few Jews still live there. Only 300,000 Polish Jews out of a prewar population of 3.5 million survived the Holocaust, and nearly all of those emigrated in the 1960s under pressure from the communist government. Barely 5,000 remain. Yet kosher food, Yiddish theater and Jewish-history studies are becoming more popular.

Polish schools are beginning to deal with the long-suppressed history of the country's Jews. The mournful music of Golda Tencer, a singer at Warsaw's Yiddish Theater for 23 years, is occasionally featured on television. Last year 120 non-Jewish children signed up to learn her music. Tencer recalls a recent essay contest sponsored by the Polish ministry of education on the subject "One Thousand Years of Jews in Poland." "We thought maybe 100 or 200 would participate," she says. "There were 4,000."

Perhaps the oddest indication of Polish interest in things Jewish is a craze for kosher drinks. The hottest-selling alcoholic beverage is "kosher vodka," with a label showing bearded rabbis in prayer shawls and Polish names in Hebrew-like lettering. There is also kosher beer and even kosher mineral water, not generally required of even the most orthodox of Jews, who are content to drink tap water.

In Germany, the very heart of the Holocaust, so-called philo-Semitism is widespread. Berlin ranks just after New York City and Los Angeles as a center for klezmer music, the clarinet-based tunes traditionally played at Jewish weddings and gatherings. The Institute for Judaism, part of the Free University of Berlin, has 122 students, none of them Jews, enrolled in its classes on religion, history and Israeli politics. Some young Germans with no Jewish background are even choosing to convert.

But in much of Eastern Europe it is Jews themselves who need to investigate their heritage. In Moscow, Maureen Greenwood, a project coordinator for an American Jewish human-rights organization, described a U.S. rabbi's shock upon finding a Russian Orthodox icon in a Jewish family's living room. "The reason," says Greenwood, "is that all religion was so repressed. Jews and Christians were all in the same boat. People simply want to satisfy their religious longings."

The need to reintroduce children to their culture is especially urgent in Russia, where 70 years of repression and assimilation obliterated Jewish consciousness more completely than almost anywhere else. "The children should feel at home, among their own," says Zev Kyravsky, founder of the Achei Tmimim Chabad Lubavitch school in Moscow. "They should receive the education their parents could not get."

Many of Russia's Jews are flocking to Berlin and Hamburg, where Jewish communities once were, in search of opportunity. At the beginning of 1992 the official count for the Jewish community in Germany was about 34,000. Since then another

JEWISH ROOTS The restoration of graves in a Pragu

FREED—MAGNUM FOR TIME

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THE POWER OF PRAYER
The young woman lighting a candle in Prague's Jerusalem synagogue on Friday night is one of many newcomers to the daily services and regular study groups that have revived an interest in Judaism even where very few Jews remain

TRAINING A NEW GENERATION
From the Baltic to the Black Sea, reawakened Jews are gathering to learn the customs of their people in study classes like the one taught by Rabbi Michael Schudrich at the Lauder Educational Center in Warsaw

, reviving traditions buried in the ashes of Hitler's ovens

LEONARD FREED—MAGNUM FOR TIME

Prague cemetery is only one of the ways the revitalized remnants of an ancient community are openly embracing their culture and heritage

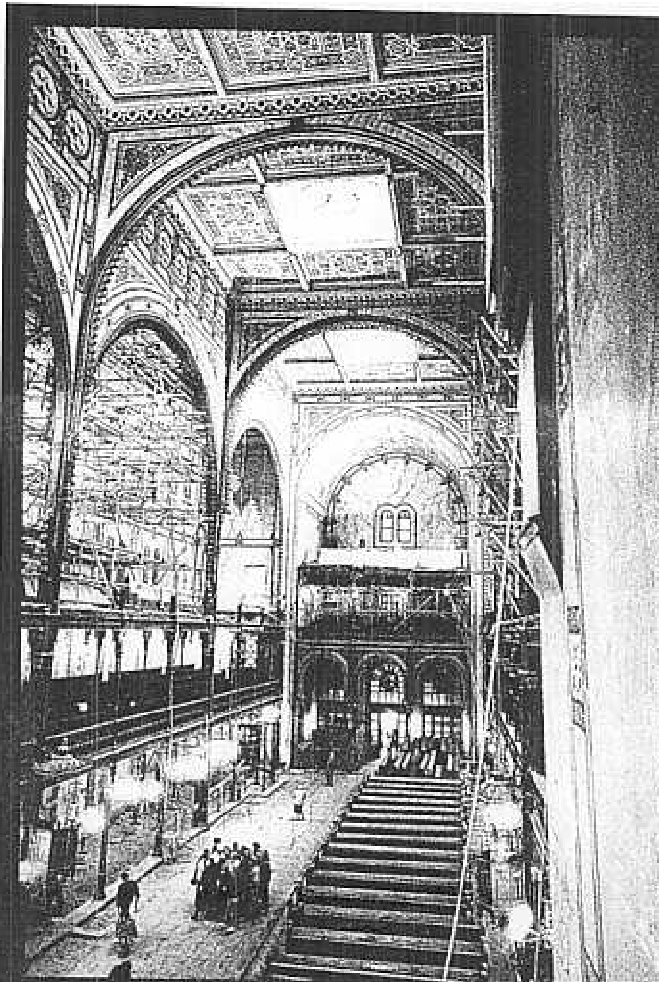
20,000 have arrived from the East, and more are expected at a rate of about 10,000 a year for the foreseeable future.

That is the most significant change in the community since the end of World War II, and it is upsetting to those who believe that Jews who leave Russia should be going to Israel, even the U.S., but in no case to Germany. "They are going from one hell to another," says Dov Shilansky, a member of the Israeli parliament from the rightist Likud group. "They are living next to people who killed their brethren." But many of those who live in Germany argue that they have a right, even a duty, to remain. "If all of us fled Germany," says Shlomit Tulgan, a student in Berlin, "then Hitler would have achieved his desire of making Germany free of Jews. We can't let that happen." Serge Klarsfeld, the French Nazi hunter, believes the Jews belong in Eastern Europe despite the Holocaust. "To live in Cracow, in Prague or in Budapest is not to live with assassins. It is to live with the memory of Jewish life that once flourished there."

The Jewish renaissance in those areas must overcome more than the horrors of Nazism. Even before the repressions of the 20th century, large numbers of Central European Jews chose integration and assimilation as a means of easing conflict with Christian society. In Hungary, especially, full assimilation was the pattern in the urban professions. During the so-called Bekabeli—the "time of peace" from about 1870 to World War I—many of Hungary's university professors were Jewish by birth but had repressed that fact, sometimes even accepting Christian baptism.

After World War II, Hungary's 100,000 survivors found themselves living under a communist regime that suppressed religion of any kind. Intolerance once again turned to deadly persecution across Eastern Europe when Jewish physicians were accused in 1953 of attempting to poison a number of high-level Soviet government officials. Having survived the war, many Jews throughout Eastern Europe came to a terrible conclusion: whatever the regime, it was best not to be Jewish at all. "If they spit at you long enough, you feel like you must really be guilty of something," says Anne Frank school director Berend. "Most of the Jews of my generation went through that psychological misery."

They tried to erase their Jewishness or, failing that, hide it from their children. Matyas Eorsi, a member of Hungary's National Assembly, remembers how his father changed his name from the plainly Jewish Schleiffer to the indeterminate Eorsi. Years later, when the elder Eorsi was in the late stages of Alzheimer's disease, his son found him one day weeping and uttering his first cogent words in months: "I am Jewish." That, says Eorsi, "was the one fact that seemed to have survived in his ravaged mind."



EDWARD SEROTTA FOR TIME

SACRED PLACES Restoring Budapest's vast synagogue

Underneath the surface, anti-Semitism and nationalism still stir memories of pogroms past

For all the hopeful revivalism, a current of fear and pessimism lurks beneath the surface. Anti-Semitism and nationalism stir memories of pogroms past. "It is still possible to be frightened," says Alla Gerber, a Jewish member of the Russian parliament. "There is a feeling that we are guests who should leave on time." Berend, in Budapest, says there have been anti-Semitic overtones in recent election campaigns, such as the word ZSIDO (Jew) scrawled on posters of the Liberal Democrats. "Things seem good now," she says, "but no one knows what will happen if the economy keeps going down and people start clamoring for a strongman. The Jews could still end up paying a bitter price."

Even without resurgent anti-Semitism, nobody believes Jewish life in Central Europe will ever be what it was before the Holocaust. The world of the shtetl is lost; the Yiddish language is becoming as inaccessible as Welsh or Aramaic; the Jews of Marc Chagall's paintings are gone forever. "You cannot revive Jewish culture here," says Russia's Gerber. "You cannot revive something that is finished." Others are troubled that the youthful embrace of Judaism is only rarely a question of faith. "A lot of them want to be Jewish without the religion," complains Rabbi Jozsef Schweitzer, head of Budapest's Rabbinical Seminary. "We as rabbis want the end station of this renaissance to be synagogue Jews, not club Jews."

Perhaps it is a mistake, though, to measure the quality of the Jewish revival merely by counting heads in the synagogue. American photojournalist Ed Serotta, who has spent the past 10 years chronicling the revival of Judaism in Central Europe and whose work appears on these pages, recalls an incident in northern Romania where he met a kosher butcher who traveled four days a week to deliver meat to just 30 families. "I asked him, 'How can such small numbers count?' He chuckled and looked at me as if I'd asked an enormously stupid question. 'Numbers don't count.'" *—Reported by Jeremy Frankel/Berlin, James L. Graff/Budapest, Nomi Morris/Warsaw and Constance Richards/Moscow, with other bureaus*