

8-2020

Jewish Holidays in the Time of the Corona Virus Pandemic in Slovakia

Peter Salner

Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Salner, Peter (2020) "Jewish Holidays in the Time of the Corona Virus Pandemic in Slovakia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 6 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss6/9>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

JEWISH HOLIDAYS IN THE TIME OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN SLOVAKIA¹

by Peter Salner

Peter Salner is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia. He was educated at the Comenius University, Faculty of Philosophy, where he received the PhD degree in ethnography and obtained the DrSc degree from the Slovak Academy of Sciences. He also lectured on Jewish affairs at Charles University in Prague and Comenius University in Bratislava. He is the author of 16 books and over 150 papers published in specialized journals in Slovakia and abroad. His focus is on the research of Jewish social culture in the 20th and 21st centuries in Slovakia and urban ethnology with an emphasis on social life.

Abstract

The first wave of the new coronavirus pandemic swept through Slovakia between March 1 and May 31, 2020. During this relatively short period, four important Jewish holidays took place: Purim, Pesach, Lag BaOmer, and Shavuot. When the news of the pandemic initially broke, a large part of Slovak society viewed COVID-19 as a remote, and therefore, not entirely dangerous, threat. This attitude shifted on March 6, , when the first case of the disease was confirmed in the country. On March 9, the authorities reacted by introducing the first set of public health measures, which the Jewish Religious Community immediately relayed to its members. The policy adopted by the JRC leadership was faced with a serious religious challenge. In these conditions, the observance of holidays required a degree of improvisation. Bar a few extraordinary examples, it was impossible to fulfil all of the traditionally required customs. Factors of selectiveness, streamlining, and individualization therefore had an even greater impact than usual. Involuntary isolation brought out the importance of family ties, as well as the need for solidarity.

The Beginning of the New Coronavirus Pandemic

The first wave of the new coronavirus pandemic swept through Slovakia between March 1 and May 31, 2020. During this relatively short time period, four important Jewish holidays took place: Purim (13 Adar, i.e. March 9-10), Pesach (14-22 Nisan, i.e. April 8-15),

¹This paper emerged in collaboration with the VEGA 2/0062/17 project, *Sviatky a rituály: ich spoločenské kontexty a funkcie (Slovensko, 21. storočie)* [Holidays and Rituals: Their Societal Contexts and Functions (Slovakia, 21st Century)], which is being carried out at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Lag BaOmer (18 Iyar, i.e. May 11-12), and Shavuot (5-7 Sivan, i.e. May 28-30).² Apart from having historical and religious significance, many of these holidays are characterized by a strong community (and family) aspect, and their celebration includes various social activities.³

In Judaism, one of the requirements for divine worship, both in everyday circumstances and during holidays, is the attendance of the *minyan* (10 adult Jewish men). In the spring of 2020, as a consequence of the pandemic, all gatherings were strictly forbidden, which is why it was necessary to look for alternative solutions or to simply ignore the holidays altogether. In this paper, I discuss how the largest Jewish religious community (JRC) in Slovakia, the Bratislava community, tackled this challenge. Ethnological research has also had to adapt to the emergency situation. Conventional means of information gathering (particularly direct observation and interviews) had to be replaced by modern technology. I acquired the data used in this paper via emails which the leadership of the community used to address its members, as well as via Skype, Zoom, and telephone and text message conversations.

A Brief Introduction to the Jewish Community in Bratislava

According to the 1940 census, which was held during the Holocaust but prior to the start of the deportations (the first transport left Bratislava on March 26, 1942), the city was home to 15,102 people who subscribed to the Jewish faith.⁴ By the time of the liberation in 1945, that number had dropped to about 3,000 individuals, some of whom were new settlers from the Slovak countryside.⁵ The *Aliyah* which took place between 1945 and 1950⁶ (afterwards, the Communist regime made emigration to Israel illegal), the wave of emigration following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Warsaw Pact on August 21,

² The given time period also includes two modern holidays that are important from the perspective of the community, namely Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Day, 27 Nisan-April 21) and Yom Haatzmaut (Israel Independence Day, 5 Iyar-April 29). Because they have a different character, I chose to omit them from this paper.

³ In this paper, I focus on activities which JRC Bratislava undertook in relation to the holidays. The community also launched various social relief activities (supplying facemasks, respirators, and sanitation products, delivering food, and so on), which were mostly aimed at high-risk groups (the elderly, oncological patients, etc.).

⁴ Petra Lárišová, *Židovská komunita v Bratislave v roku 1940. Historická demografia na základe sčítania ľudu*. [The Jewish Community in Bratislava in 1940. Historical Demographics Based on the National Census] (Bratislava: Milan Šimečka Foundation, SAS Institute of Ethnology, Jewish Religious Community in Bratislava, 2000), p. 9.

⁵ Benjamin Eichler, *Príspevok k histórii Židov na Slovensku z doby druhej svetovej vojny až po október 1972*. [A Contribution to the History of Jews in Slovakia Between the Second World War and October 1972] undated manuscript, Toronto, p. 71.

⁶ For more on the issue of *Aliyah*, see Chana Jablonková, "Izrael a Židia zo Slovenska" [Israel and Jews from Slovakia] *Acta Judaica Slovaca* 4, 1998, pp. 163-186; Peter Salner, "Zmeny hodnotových orientácií Židov na Slovensku po roku 1945 (na príklade emigrácie do Izraela v štyridsiatych resp. šesťdesiatych rokoch)." [The Changes in the Value Orientations of Jews in Slovakia After 1945 (on the Example of Emigration to Israel in the 1950s and 60s)] In Peter Salner (ed.), *The Jewish Community After 1945* (Bratislava: SAS Institute of Ethnology), pp. 119-136.

1968,⁷ and the gradual passing of the more senior members of the community, as well as the passivity of the younger ones during the era of so-called Normalization (1970-1989), resulted in the fact that, nowadays, the community counts fewer than 500 members. Another change consequent from the *Shoah* (and four decades of Communist rule) has to do with the relationship of part of the survivors (and their descendants) to Judaism. Many view their Jewishness through a secular, rather than a religious lens.⁸ This condition persists despite the fact that, since the collapse of the Communist regime in November 1989, the leadership of the community has consistently worked towards the revival of religious life.⁹

When the news of the pandemic initially broke, a large part of Slovak society viewed COVID-19 as a remote, and therefore not entirely dangerous, threat. This attitude shifted on March 6, 2020, when the first case of the disease was confirmed in the country. On March 9, the authorities reacted by introducing the first set of public health measures, which the JRC immediately relayed to its members. On the evening of March 9, the community leadership sent out a newsletter entitled “Coronavirus–JRC Measures–IMPORTANT!” Besides calling for people to “adopt and respect the preventive measures,” the letter also mentioned that, from March 10, 2020, until further notice (but at least until March 24), the community was suspending all religious, cultural, social, and educational activities as well as the distribution of lunches in the community center. (The dates suggest that both the state and the JRC expected a quick resolution of the crisis).

The policy adopted by the JRC leadership was faced with a serious religious challenge, seeing as the evening of March 9 marked the beginning of Purim, and on the following day, Rabbi Myers, in collaboration with the Chabad Educational Center, was planning to hold a traditional Purim costume ball, which is especially popular among families with children. The

⁷ The ethnological aspects of the emigration of Bratislava Jews after August 1968 were discussed by Ivica Bumová, “Postoj ŠtB k emigrácii československých občanov v rokoch 1963-1983 (s dôrazom na Západoslovenský kraj)” [The Attitude of the Communist Secret Service Towards the Emigration of Czechoslovak Citizens in 1963-1983 (with an Emphasis on the Western Slovakia Region)]. In Daniel Luther (ed.), *E/Migrácie a Slovensko* [E/Migrations and Slovakia], (Bratislava: SAS Institute of Ethnology, 2006), pp. 41-78; Peter Salner, “Židovská emigrácia zo Slovenska po auguste 1968” [Jewish Emigration from Slovakia After August 1968], in *ibid.*, pp. 75-94.

⁸ The incumbent chairman of the JRC, Tomáš Stern, has taken a similar stance, repeatedly expressing his secularism in public. During a speech on Lag BaOmer, he said: “Before I conclude, allow me to be somewhat personal again. A lot of you may find this surprising, but I’m a rather secular Jew. I’ve never made that a secret. That said, I deeply honor and believe in the importance of Jewish religious traditions.”

⁹ For more on the issue of the community’s complicated relationship to Judaism, see Peter Salner, “The Role of Judaism in the Jewish Community after the Holocaust.” In *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, 2013, pp. 215-224, and Peter Salner, “Judaizmus v tradícii a súčasnosti. Prem eny židovskej komunity v 19.-21. storočí. Etnologický pohľad” [Judaism in Tradition and the Present Day. Transformations of the Jewish Community in the 19th-21st centuries. An ethnological view]. (Bratislava: Veda 2019).

invitation advertised an attractive program that would include "...the reading of the Megillah,¹⁰ masks, a three-course Persian feast, professional henna tattoos, and a raffle with the opportunity of winning a stay in a luxury hotel resort, electronics, or a flight ticket to Tel Aviv." Rabbi Myers, who was determined to uphold the tradition of festive celebration even in the difficult circumstances, thus found himself at loggerheads with the JRC leadership, which prioritized the health and safety of its members. On March 9, Rabbi Myers sent out an email informing of the organizer's intention to go ahead with the ball. Among other things, he wrote that

several members of our community have approached us in relation to the coronavirus pandemic and the holding of tomorrow's Purim celebration. That is why we wish to specify the following:

The majority society regularly holds celebrations and "cultural events" which, though pleasant, do not carry any particular significance and can therefore be cancelled or postponed. But we, Jews, are now celebrating the holiday of Purim, when we remember and reaffirm the fact that G-d miraculously saved our nation from certain death, while also showing our faith that He continues doing so. Today afternoon, we contacted the Department of Epidemiology and Infectious Diseases (Regional Bureau of Public Health) to determine whether it was possible, given the prevailing circumstances, to organize an event for a smaller group of mutually familiar people from Bratislava in a venue that had been appropriately disinfected. The worker of the bureau confirmed that the event did not have to be called off¹¹ while stressing that it was necessary to practice certain precautions (such as frequent handwashing, etc.) recommended by the Ministry of Health. We need to foster our faith in G-d and 'fortify ourselves' with mitzvot, which He commanded to us for our benefit. That is truly the only way of securing the health, safety, and continuity of our nation.

We therefore invite you to fulfil the four special mitzvot of Purim—attending the reading of the Megillah, taking part in a Kosher feast, handing out shalach manos food baskets, and giving to the poor—Matanot La'Evyonim—at the Purim celebration tomorrow evening, on Tuesday, March 10, at 5 p.m. on 4 Drevená Street, Bratislava. Let us meet together in friendship, as one family—as Queen Esther said unto Mordechai, 'Go, gather all the Jews' so they may live, celebrate, and have faith as Jews do—and beseech G-d to support and bless us and the whole country with safety and good health. This is our strength and the source of our success. Am Yisrael Chai!

¹⁰The holiday commemorates how Queen Esther saved the Jewish nation from the scheming Haman, who was an advisor to the Persian king, Ahasuerus, in the fifth century before the civil calendar. Attending the reading of Megillah Ester belongs among the most important mitzvahs. Jaakov Newman, Gabriel Sivan," *Judaismus od A do Z.* " *Slovník pojmů a termínů.* [Judaism A-Z: Lexicon of Terms and Concepts] (Prague: Sefer 1992), p. 140.

¹¹This leniency may have had to do with the fact that in the early days, the people (and the authorities) did not fully appreciate the rules of quarantine. Later, officials would not have greenlighted an event of this sort.

B"H
 Židovské vzdelávacie centrum Chabad a ŽNO Bratislava
 Vás srdečne pozývajú na výročnú, zábavnú a multikultúrnu oslavu sviatku Purim

Purim v Perzii

Kto?
 Všetky postavy z Megily, Aladín, Maimonides, ženy v burkách a ...
 ty! – muži, ženy a deti všetkých vekových skupín!

Utorok 10. 3. 2020 o 17:30 hod.
 ŽVC Chabad – Drevená ul. 4

Purimová hostina
 s perskými špecialitami:
 Ghorme Sabzi, Shirmal,
 Chelow, Šalát Fatuš,
 Zerešk aj hamentašen!

Špeciálna zábava
 Profesionálne
 (dočasné)
 tetovanie hennou

Tombola s úžasnými cenami!
 +1 lístok na tombolu
 zadarmo pre všetkých,
 ktorí prídu v kostýme



Vstupné
 Dospelí: 12 eur
 Deti 3-9: 6 eur
 Deti 0-2: zdarma

Rezervácie najneskôr do 3. 3. 2020 ☎ 0905964155

The leadership of the community promptly responded with an email of its own, announcing that it was cancelling the event. In his next reaction, the rabbi reiterated that his decision remained unchanged: “Dear friends. We wish to inform you that there has been a misunderstanding in the email communication sent out by the JRC. We would like to announce that the Purim celebration on 4 Drevená Street will take place, but that the JRC will not take part in its organization. We apologize for the confusion, and we are looking forward to fulfilling the Purim observances with you.” Despite the disapproval of the JRC, which distanced itself from the event, and the criticism of some members of the community, the Purim celebration took place as scheduled in the Chabad Educational Center (though with a smaller attendance than in the previous years).

A week later, on March 17, 2020, the press published the first projection of the spread of COVID-19, which had been elaborated by the Institute of Health Policy of the Slovak Ministry of Health: “On Sunday, we adopted further, stricter measures to fight the spread of the coronavirus. If these remain in effect without change, the peak of the epidemic in Slovakia is expected on the 110th day since their introduction. At that time, some 10% of the population is predicted to be infected with the virus.”¹² The projected numbers, which would have amounted to over half a million infected and tens of thousands of dead, proved to have been

¹² <https://www.webnoviny.sk/vzdravotnictve/epidemia-koronavirusu-pri-sucasnom-tempe-vyvrcholi-o-110-dni-nakazenych-bude-10%-ludi/>

hugely exaggerated.¹³ Martin Smatana, the head of the institute, resigned from his post on April 30, 2020. At the end of the day, however, I suspect that it was precisely because of their unrealistic nature that the models had a positive impact. The concerned population observed the government's instructions, limiting social contacts (including visits with parents and other family members who did not live in the same household),¹⁴ dutifully wearing facemasks and using sanitizers. Wherever possible, companies and state institutions shifted to work from home.

It was in this atmosphere of quarantine and widespread fear of the invisible infection that the celebration of Pesach, which commemorates the ancient Hebrews' escape from Egyptian enslavement,¹⁵ was scheduled (April 8-15). The eight-day holiday includes social activities and difficult dietary demands. Although the Institute of Health Policy had partially adjusted its original projections, the situation still looked ominous. Adding to the concerns was the fact that Easter had fallen on the same time period (April 10-13). In Slovakia, Easter is traditionally associated with attending mass, but also with intense social life. During the holiday, people travel to their cities and towns of origin, visiting their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. These gatherings go hand-in-hand with food and drink. The media released jokes and analyses which warned that Easter visits would contribute to the further spread of the coronavirus. The government issued a temporary limitation on the freedom of movement. As announced in the daily press, "from Wednesday morning to Easter Sunday, Slovaks will be unable to leave their homes. The measures already in place will be expanded to include restrictions on free movement. Violators will be fined." Between April 8-13, people were forbidden to venture beyond their doorsteps for any reason but to do their shopping, go to work, visit the doctor, or go out into nature. Even the exceptions were limited to the district in which people lived. The police and the army were charged with overseeing the observance of these measures.¹⁶

¹³ As of May 29, 2020, Slovakia has officially recorded 1,520 infected and 28 dead. As far as I know, no members of the JRC have succumbed to COVID-19 (not even in the Ohel David retirement home). However, fears persist of the arrival of a second, potentially worse, wave of the pandemic. Some measures have been lifted (including on the holding of divine service), but most people still wear facemasks in the streets (they are only mandatory inside buildings) and limit social contacts, especially with the elderly.

¹⁴ Young people started doing grocery shopping for their grandparents, sometimes even for their neighbors or acquaintances who belonged in the high-risk group (aged 65+), leaving the shopping bags at their doorstep. Many seniors had a difficult time not being able to meet with their children and grandchildren.

¹⁵ I published part of the section on Pesach in Peter Salner, "Sviatok Pesach v dobe koronavírusovej pandémie. Etnologický pohľad." [Pesach in the Time of the Coronavirus Pandemic. An ethnological view] *Národopisní revue*, 2020, 2, pp. 158-161.

¹⁶ Peter Kováč, "Matovič chce pohyb ľudí obmedziť. Ako by mala vyzerat' Veľká noc." [PM Matovič wants to limit the free movement of people. What Easter is going to look like.] In *Sme*, April 5, 2020.

Preparations for Pesach were also affected by the emergency situation. Under normal circumstances, the week before the start of the holiday, the community would begin selling matzo and other foods necessary to the proper religious observance of the holiday.¹⁷ For that purpose, many people typically meet on the JRC premises—an impossibility this year due to the pandemic.

The community once again made use of email communication. Information and instructions relevant to preparations for the holiday and to the holiday itself were humorously termed “The Flying Seder” and accompanied with a picture of Rabbi Myers “flying” on a matzo. The JRC announced a Pesach essay competition with the theme, “What makes this day different from others?”¹⁸ Because of the quarantine, the traditional vending of foods in the JRC community center was canceled, and the goods were delivered directly to the houses of the community members. In the interest of smooth coordination, the normally complicated process was notably streamlined: “THE FOLLOWING ARE THE DEFINITIVE, NON-NEGOTIABLE CONDITIONS OF THE SALE: Every family (living in the same household) will be receiving 3 kilograms of matzo, 1 kilogram of matzo flour, and 2 bottles of kosher wine (1 white, 1 red). THE QUANTITIES ARE FIXED. We would like to ask that you be present at home at the scheduled time so that you may collect your delivery at the entrance. During collection, please use available protective equipment (a facemask or a respirator, possibly both, and eye protection).”

The delivery of food took place the day before the start of the holiday. Administrative workers had arranged the exact delivery time in advance via telephone. It was not easy, because the fear of high infection and fatality rates was still very much alive in the minds of most. Interestingly, spring 2020 did not mark the first potentially deadly celebration of this holiday. In his (thus unpublished) memoir, the long-time chairman of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities (1955-1972) and officeholder in the Bratislava JRC, Benjamin Eichler, recalls how, in 1942, during the deportations, he travelled 80 kilometers to the city of Nitra despite the existing risks and restrictions to collect a consignment of matzo and bring it back to believers in Bratislava, where the making of the food was already forbidden: “What could I

<https://domov.sme.sk/c/22376993/koronavirus-velka-noc-skoro-bez-pohybu-ako-by-mala-vyzerat.html>. Accessed May 23, 2020.

¹⁷ Over the eight days of the holiday, believers cannot consume leavened products (or even have them in their homes).

¹⁸ This question (and the answer to it) represents a part of the Pesach Hagada.

have done? An Orthodox Jew needs to eat matzo even at a time when his people are being deported to death camps.”¹⁹

In retrospect, comparisons between these two historical periods can seem improper, but in March and April 2020, they were not infrequent. The existence (and incommensurability) of similar parallels was emphasized by the author of the following article:

Today, as I sit ‘imprisoned’ in the comfort of my own home; as I try to find someplace to hide from my relatives, I am compelled to think about bodies crammed in cattle cars.

When I wash my hands for the twentieth time in a single day, I think of the single bucket that the occupants of a whole car had to relieve themselves in.

When I concernedly look at the dwindling supplies in my otherwise plentiful pantry and write down a list of products that we need to restock on, I think about the three-days’ worth of food that girls were allowed to take with them on the train. For most, it was the last food they would eat in their lives.

I certainly don’t want to trivialize the ongoing pandemic in contrast to the events of the 1940s. But when I grieve my lost comfort and grumble about the restrictions designed to protect me and my loved ones, I hear the whistling of the departing train. And it reminds me that this difficult spring is merely a test of my discipline. It reminds me of those whom no one told to stay at home.²⁰



¹⁹ Benjamin Eichler: *Príspevok k histórii Židov na Slovensku z doby druhej svetovej vojny až po október 1972*. Toronto, p. 91.

²⁰ Soňa Jánošová, “Myslím na tých, ktorým nikto nepovedal, aby ostali doma.” [I think of those whom no one told to stay at home.] In *Sme doma*, March 26, 2020. <https://zena.sme.sk/c/22368328/zostante-doma-v-marci-ineho-roka-by-ste-za-tuto-moznost-dali-hocico-html>. Accessed April 20, 2020.

Going back to this year's Pesach: the celebration traditionally starts with divine worship in the synagogue, which is followed by a festive Seder supper. In the past, people could choose whether to spend it collectively as a community, or in the intimacy of their family. The ban on public gatherings automatically eliminated the possibility of a communal Seder in Chabad Center Slovakia or in the Bratislava community center. Rabbi Myers and the chairman of the Bratislava JRC nevertheless addressed the community members through video. This way, the rabbi also delivered his ceremonial sermon.

The circumstances of the pandemic had manifold negative effects on celebrations within the family. Most of the young (and the elderly) respected the recommendation on not meeting with people who belonged in the high-risk group of 65+ years old (including their own family members). One of the participants of the Pesach essay competition wrote that, in 2020, "this day was no different from others because ...every year until now, my father sat at the head of the table and prayed from his Haggadah" (Man, 1960). A woman (1979) had always celebrated Pesach with her parents, who live away from Bratislava: "Yesterday was the first time I had to prepare everything myself, and I was pretty overwhelmed." Despite that, she was in touch with her brother and parents "over the camera". Other families also made use of technology. An illustrative account of the situation is given by another participant of the Pesach competition:

My sister lives in Israel. We had been hoping to have the Seder together in Bratislava. Our plans were partly foiled by the coronavirus, but thanks to Skype, we got to celebrate the holiday together after all. We laid out all the necessary ingredients around the computer, blessed the candlelight, prepared matzo, a Seder plate, and a glass for Elijah, then bravely read and sang the whole Haggadah, and drank four glasses of wine. In the middle of the night, we said goodbye, each from another part of the world, but yet together, and we wished: *L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim!*²¹

Thanks to the achievements of modern technology, even people separated by thousands of kilometers could be in direct contact. It is precisely this search for (and discovery of) ways of coping with the involuntary absence of one's relatives that was one of the specifics of this year's holiday. Additionally, it highlights that, in the present day, the principal dimension of Pesach has to do with the family. This is also confirmed by the fact that most of the contributions submitted to the essay competition were devoted to separation and the coming together of families.

The forced absence of the eldest generation, which typically leads (or, at least, supervises) the supper, resulted in the fact that many families opted for a simplified approach.

²¹ "Next year in Jerusalem" (in Hebrew).

A man (1979) has said that he left out some of the ritual elements of the Seder but otherwise observed the holiday diligently.²² (Man, 1979). In another case, “our Seder was modest. We didn’t go overboard with prayer, and we may have even skipped some things” (Man, 1974).

The example of Pesach is another confirmation of the thesis that, out of the complex assortment of traditions, people today tend to pick out individual elements which they combine to create their own version of the holiday. Apart from selectiveness, the unique form of the holiday is also influenced by factors of streamlining and individualization.²³



The popular Lag BaOmer holiday celebrates the miraculous ending of the plague that had killed most of the students of Rabbi Akiva in the second century of the civil calendar. It also commemorates the death of the influential Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who is the alleged author of the quote “Love your neighbors as yourself.” The holiday has a festive character. In the conditions of the pandemic, the community was unable to hold the traditional feast and

²² He means that, during the eight days of the holiday, in accordance with religious prescriptions, he and his family did not consume bread or other leavened foods. From my earlier research, I know examples where people only observed this tradition symbolically, or they ignored the Pesach rules altogether.

²³ I discuss this phenomenon at greater length in Peter Salner, *Židia na Slovensku po roku 1989. Komunita medzi budúcnosťou a minulosťou*. [Jews in Slovakia After 1989. The Community Between the Past and Present] (Bratislava: Veda 2018).

party, which includes the symbolic shooting of a bow and arrow and games for children. As a substitute solution, Chabad Central Slovakia, the Bratislava JRC, and the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities held the Festival of Togetherness [*Festival spolupatričnosti*]. This took the form of a concert by Rabbi Zeew Stiefel, the architect of the event. The program alternated between music and speeches by representatives of the organizing institutions. People could watch the event live or via Zoom, YouTube, or Facebook. Apart from explaining the history and significance of the holiday, the speakers emphasized the integrity and togetherness of the community and the importance of “propagating our traditions, with sincerity and humility, even in view of the particularities of the modern world.”²⁴ According to the organizers, the live broadcast was watched by around 200 viewers.

The final ceremonial occasion was the holiday of Shavuot (May 28-30), which commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Jewish nation on Mount Sinai. In 2020, besides having religious import, the holiday symbolically represents the official conclusion of the first wave of the pandemic. For several weeks now, the daily number of newly infected in Slovakia has been in the single digits. The number of COVID-19 victims has also plateaued. This joyful fact was reflected in the invitation to the “FIRST POST-COVID DIVINE SERVICE.” Although the participants had to observe strict hygiene measures, it was the first public event to be held in the synagogue after nearly three months of isolation and limited social contact.



²⁴ From an address by Chairman of JRC Bratislava, Tomáš Stern.

Conclusion

Between March 1 and May 31, 2020, the Bratislava JRC responded to quarantine and social distancing measures with intense electronic communication, as well as with specific relief efforts aimed particularly at the high-risk members of the community. From the number of views, it appears that technology has attracted more participants than usual. The dearth of external impulses during the period of isolation, as well as the ability to watch the broadcasts at a time convenient for the viewer, may have played a role. Only once we have gone back to normal will we see whether the increased interest in the holidays is indicative of a permanent phenomenon or merely a reaction to exceptional circumstances. Modern conveniences were exploited especially by Rabbi Myers who, using the JRC website, regularly sent out Shabbat sermons and addresses. In this case, too, the number of views was markedly higher than the usual number of people personally attending service in the synagogue.

Clearly, in these conditions, the observance of holidays required a degree of improvisation. Bar a few extraordinary examples, it was impossible to fulfill all traditionally required customs. Factors of selectiveness, streamlining, and individualization therefore had an even greater impact than usual. Involuntary isolation brought out the importance of family ties, as well as the need for solidarity. From the perspective of the community, it is crucial that the JRC leadership used technology to allow its members to celebrate the holidays even in these challenging times. More importantly, it let the members know that they were not alone and that they formed a fully-fledged part of the Jewish community.

Seeing as this is the first probe into the situation of the Jewish community at the time of the pandemic, it will be interesting, in the future, to complement and verify the presented conclusions.

Translated from Slovak into English by Jakub Tlodka.