

## TRANSMISSION OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND JEWISH IDENTITY IN POSTWAR JEWISH GENERATIONS THROUGH WAR SOUVENIRS

Jakub Bronec

My contribution includes a sample of testimonies containing the life stories of Jews born in the aftermath of World War II in two countries (Czechoslovakia and Luxembourg). At that time, Czechoslovakian Jews were living through the era of de-Stalinisation, and their narratives offer new insights into this segment of Jewish postwar history that differ from those of Jews living in liberal democratic European states. Based on personal documents, photos, letters and souvenirs, the conducted interviews highlight an interesting way of maintaining personal memories in Jewish families and how this varies from one generation to the next. In my contribution, I am planning to illustrate the importance of these small artefacts for the transmission of Jewish collective memory.

My presentation showcases people widely referred to as the “*second and third Jewish generation*”, their attitude to current notions of Jewish memory and self-perception and their role in society. Some had to live under totalitarian oppression, others had to face a wave of Jewish Sephardic immigrants coming from overseas – and witnesses admit that the arrival of these newcomers often caused difficulties in Jewish communities. Small objects from the war, often displayed in their households, serve as a reminder of their roots and destiny, which should not be forgotten.

This paper is a part of my broader research project examining distinctions and similarities in identity formation through generations of Czech, Slovak, French and Luxembourgish Jews, who grew up either under communism or in liberal Western Europe. The aim is to create an international virtual library and cloud storage, not only for professional educators but also for the public.

**Keywords:** Jewish family heirlooms, Jewish identity, virtual gateway

### 1. Introduction:

The contribution considers the relationship between heirlooms and their owners, which is manifested in the practice of their storage and presentation and can be defined as a particular channel for keeping family memory alive. This case study uses interviews recorded with the owners of family objects in which they share the importance of the experiences embodied in the selected artefacts. The mutual relationship between people and things is treated as an interactive space in which objects (sacred relics, souvenirs, mementos and locks of hair) maintain a physical continuity of resemblance. Family objects go beyond our cultural beliefs and form our own personality (Goffman 1974). Taking this statement as a starting point, the case study aims to answer the following research questions: What is the relationship between Jewish postwar generation and heirlooms? Who is in charge of maintaining Jewish family heirlooms within the family? Are there any intergenerational distinctions in keeping and maintaining the family history?

### 2. Methodology:

In terms of methodology, the datasets used in the research contain qualitative and quantitative data from autobiographical interviews and anonymous surveys. The questionnaire used consists of 32 questions, 6 of which are dedicated to family heirlooms and ritual objects. Respondents are classified into categories according to their generation and where they live. The sample covers people born between 1945 and 1980 who live or previously lived in Czechoslovakia or Luxembourg. All respondents were involved in either Jewish *kehillas* or consistories claiming allegiance to Liberal, Reform or Orthodox Judaism. This contact with Czechoslovakian and Luxembourgish emigrants living all around the world gave me a thorough insight into the transgenerational and international perception of family heirlooms. Respondents were given instructions to supplement each answer by lengthier comments about family artefacts. These datasets are more extensive than information collected through a limited number of questionnaires. Given the considerable geographical distances among analytical samples of respondents, I had to rely on a sociological method called snowballing and the pyramiding method of sampling (Heitlinger 2006).

The starting point for the sampling became Jewish youth organisations and their current and former members. They were sent a copy of the semi-structured questionnaire with a covering letter explaining the study. In general, the sampling of Luxembourgish and Czechoslovakian Jews<sup>1</sup> relied on personal networks with Jewish opinion makers in all researched groups. The sample includes respondents from all kinds of Jewish currents and movements as well as those who emigrated and those who remained in Luxembourg and Czechoslovakia. Both quantitative and qualitative data are drawn from the questionnaire. Some open-ended questions allow respondents to write down additional comments and opinions. There are also questions with a scale from 1 to 5 where respondents can simply indicate their preferences.

The most striking characteristic of the researched sample is the high level of educational attainment. The dataset based on 40 interviews with past and present Jewish leaders and opinion makers is fully in line with the overall concept of my PhD study. The sample involves secular, religious, halachic and non-halachic Jews. The interviews also attest to the continuing significance of a broadly articulated, multi-layered Czech/Slovak/Luxembourgish identity and memory. Each interview does not exceed 60 minutes in total.

### 3. Do material elements shape memories?

The graph below clearly shows that family heirlooms are important for postwar generations regardless of their origin or age. The survey also revealed that the second generation appreciates family objects slightly more than their descendants do, but it is evident that all generations value their relationship with inherited family items. The striking point is that each respondent provided a clear answer; nobody selected the answer “No opinion”.

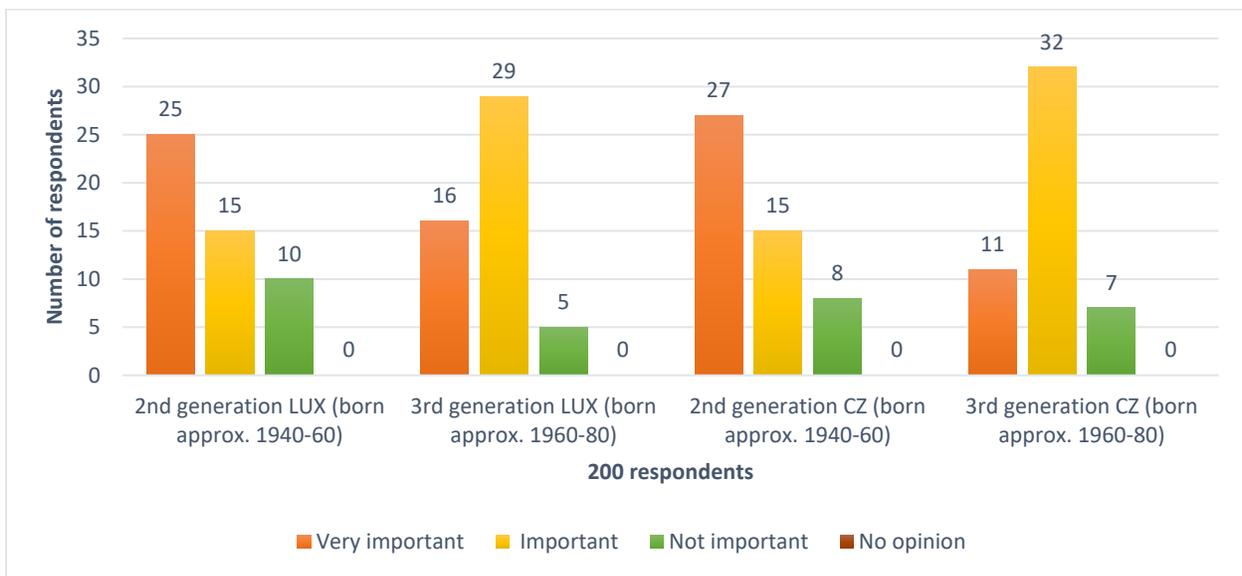


Fig. 1. How important are family memories for you (photographs, letters, genealogy, ritual items, etc.)?

Material elements play an important role in the process of remembering and shaping memories. To firmly incorporate an individual memory in the context of collective memory, there has to be a link to a specific event, person, space or subject (Kreisslová 2013). Tangible objects come in many guises – some draw their value from subjective association alone. The plainest thing becomes precious when it has personal meaning. A letter or photograph, a wedding ring, a child’s tooth or even a seaside souvenir can revive memories and inspire joy or grief.

<sup>1</sup> I work with three nationalities; Czech, Slovakian and Luxembourgish nationality. Czechoslovakia was divided into two independent states on January 1, 1993.

For every family heirloom it is essential to set the level of significance for both its guardian and the family as a whole. It is understandable that owners of family heirlooms assume personal responsibility for keeping them safe and acquire the right to represent their personal notions about the family past as real stories. Most of them classify individual objects to an assigned place according to their own hierarchical system. For instance, the third generation prefers to expose little silver goblets, photos in golden frames and family jewels in glass-fronted vitrines or cabinets. Nevertheless, there has been little scholarly effort to explore the international specificity of Jewish heirlooms across postwar generations. In Czechoslovakia, a large number of parents failed to keep religious precepts alive. There was a tendency to break all ties with Jewish religious traditions, Yiddish (as a spoken language) and Jewish education. Secular Jewish culture was first Sovietised and then entirely excluded from the public sphere. The little that remained became subject to severe political censorship (Soukupová 2016).

Some Czechoslovakian and Luxembourgish Jewish families and families with Jewish roots lost their common language, which had been considered fundamental to the family just a few generations earlier (Heitlinger 2006). However, thanks to well-guarded family artefacts they were at least able to retain childhood memories of their ancestors.

Many Czechoslovakian Jews therefore maintained their heirlooms carefully in order to facilitate memorisation and remembrance of important moments. Saved artefacts serve as a mediator of family history, but each generation gives preference to different objects. For instance, according to the information gleaned from the interviews, the second postwar generation puts greater emphasis on objects such as clocks, prayer books, eyeglasses, painted portraits, tableware, etc., despite the fact that they are often unable to provide any particular details about the stored items. They only remember their presence at home during their childhood, when they formed strong mental bonds with the objects.

#### 4. Jewish ritual items

In the opinion of sociologists, a religious component is not a significant factor in shaping Jewish identity (Chlenov 2002). However, nearly all respondents across all generations, regardless of whether or not they consider themselves to be observant Jews, demonstrated a special relationship with Jewish ritual items belonging to members of preceding generations. The only slight difference is that the members of the second generation are more attached to ritual artefacts belonging to their ancestors who died in the Holocaust. The third generation is interested in ritual and religious items in a more complex, less emotional and contextualised way. The second generation is also more suspicious of the origin of valuable items. Indeed, while they are willing to tell authentic family stories, they are also silent and cagey about how the objects came into their possession. The interviewees often changed the subject in order to avoid describing the origin of a given item.

I also noticed during the interviews that both Jewish groups placed more value on family ritual items than any other possessions. This is understandable, because ritual artefacts can be directly identified with their past function, which thus forms the basis for a sacralisation of these objects within the family myth. For Luxembourgish Jews this kind of object is converted into a *lieu de mémoire* and placed into a broader context (Halbwachs and Coser 1992). One of my interviewees remembered a painting of flat French countryside by an unknown author which hung above the kitchen table in her house. This picture embodied the memory of childhood in a postwar Jewish family. She told me that for her the picture calls to mind the Shabbat dinner with her family, going on to remark that, although the painting is not related to religious ritual, it is more significant for her than for example her mum's prayer book, which she has opened only twice.

The relationship with a family ritual heirloom passed on in a legitimate way is often formed gradually and imperceptibly. Mrs Dana K. is in touch with one of her family ritual objects, her father's *tefillin*, an item which is often passed on from generation to generation. "My son knows that he will eventually receive it. Actually, we found them in father's drawer in his desk, since my father was passionate about science and he did not practice a lot. I almost tried it on myself, but I stopped as I realised that it is a male thing." (Interview, Dana K., Prague, 6.6.2018) Dana K.'s lack of interest in the origin of all family heirlooms was striking, though she insisted on drawing the interviewer's attention to the most appropriate age for collecting these objects. Members of the third generation do

not miss the tactile contact with objects belonging to their ancestors, unlike their parents. They prefer to display them in a prominent place in their households. In my view, the piety in relation to Jewish ritual items indicates that their owners consider them to be objects of Jewish cultural heritage.

## 5. Jewish relatives in old photographs

Some project participants explained that photographs of their parents and grandparents were missing from their collection since they refused to be photographed in later life unless strictly necessary. This is often the case for people who suffered considerably during the Holocaust. Their psyche is sometimes too fragile to see themselves standing next to their relatives; it reminds them of the loss of their friends and other family members.

The content of photographs themselves was not the only significant aspect discussed during the interviews; the condition of the paper and frame was also important. Narrators cherished a faded and shabby photo that vividly reflected its former owners more than a photo that did not bear the scars of time. One notable feature of family photos was the depiction of at least one family member who had a characteristic Jewish appearance. For men it was a characteristic beard, hat or cap and for women usually a wig popping out beneath a hat. What is remarkable is the fact that owners often recalled how as children they looked through albums and discussed the old bindings as much as the photographs themselves. The owners usually took care to identify the people depicted in photos as family members or friends. Based on the interviews, the second generation in both regions prefers to keep photos in hard cover albums and regards digital snaps more sceptically than the third generation. Some consider family photos as sacred objects that should not be exposed via online social platforms. In several cases, the interviews prompted the narrators to write down brief notes on the photos themselves in case they forget the names of the people depicted. It also became clear that the third generation knows less about the people depicted on the pictures despite being their presumably family or friends. They know much less about what happened to them than their parents, who know many details about long deceased ancestors. In some cases photos became a part of another object (e.g. a cigarette case with a miniature on its cover or a pocket watch). Inscriptions in Hebrew or Yiddish on a photo recognised as a Jewish family heirloom endow those items with respected status – even if they display completely unknown people. The Hebrew letters on the ancient yellowed paper show that Jews attribute great significance to old family photos.

Since physical objects (e.g. photos and letters) allow their owners to act as the successor to previous generations; this may explain why so many people have not yet passed this family heritage onto their descendants. Interviews show that members of the second generation are not readily able to distinguish the age of collected heirlooms, but they do confer specific value on them. Keys which open the door of their family house, for example, have higher personal value than an ancient wooden inlaid wall clock. The third generation sees family heirlooms from a different perspective. They are inclined to show and present valuable items regardless of their origin and age; all that matters is whether the objects are linked to the family's past.

The concept of the “Jewish house” (as a place of memory) remained significant but transitory. It was defined through the notion of commitment to the family according to the “Jewish tradition”, which ranged from the naming of children to cooking.

## 6. Jewish identity and material culture

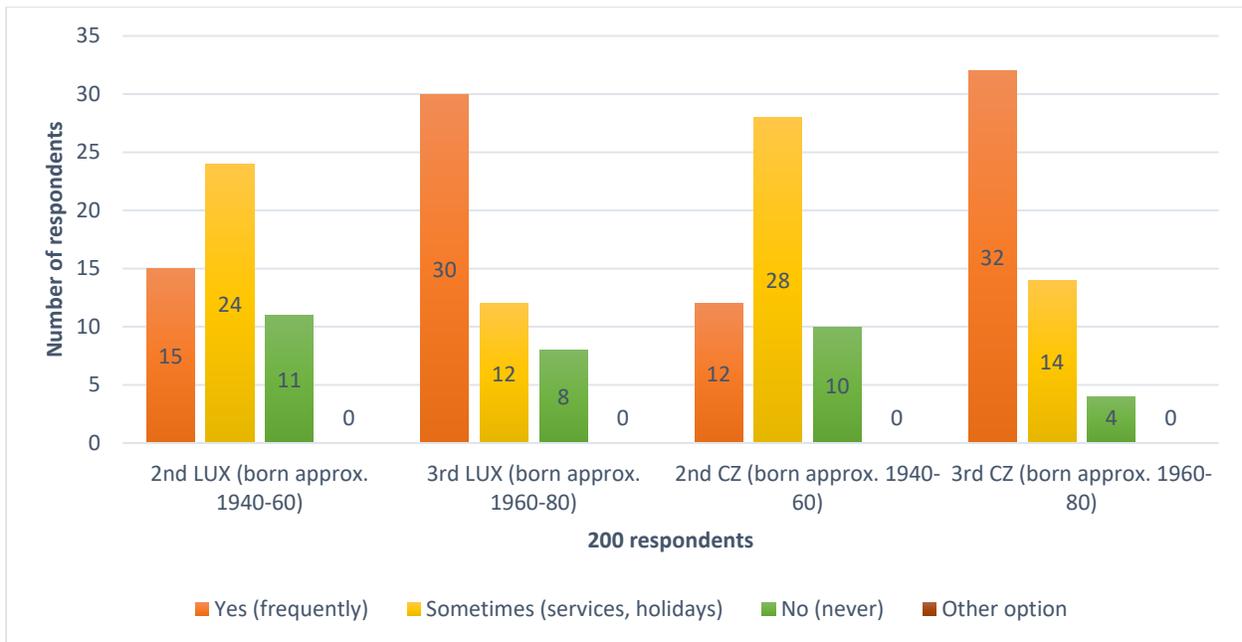
Jewish identities are not exclusive, but they are naturally multidimensional and constitute one of the components of a person's overall identity. (Tartakowsky and Dimentstein 2017) With regard to this fact, material artefacts consolidate a fundamentally social identity and indicate conformity with a particular society. (Wasserstein 1996) The link between Jewish identity, material objects and collective memory is a social process influenced by the memories and experiences of individuals within the community. The items are both inherently symbolic and externally visible.

“I do not think it is important, but I presume that every generation has an ideal age for dealing with family heritage. When you are young you want to build up your career and provide for yourself and your children. Then, of course, you have leisure time hobbies. At that time you do not pay much attention to family history; your interest begins to

develop when your relatives start disappearing with time. That is when you turn your attention to your ancestors. You realise a little late how many photos have to be described and identified for your descendants; otherwise younger generations will not know who is who.” This is just a snatch of the interview with a Czech woman Michaela V.

Nowadays, the Jewish environment in Europe is filled with virtual Jewish culture. In post-Holocaust and post-communist countries, Jewish culture has become part of the public sphere, despite the fact that Jewish communities in these countries are not numerous. Gruber comes up with the idea of a “virtual Jewish world” filled with “virtual” Jews, who are engaged in creating, forming and demonstrating Jewish culture. Despite being very active by organising cultural events and educational programmes, they are regarded as outsiders, since they are not official members of the community. (Gruber 2002) In some cases, this indicates a need to demonstrate their allegiance to Jewish society.

Young men and women in both Luxembourg and the Czech Republic often wear accessories – rings, necklaces, earrings or bracelets. Based on the analysed replies, they often choose various Jewish religious symbols or symbols associated with Israel or the Middle East. However, it is very difficult to classify and enumerate their occurrence since they often intersect with each other. The most frequent symbols represented in objects include the Star of David, the symbolic representation of Chanukah, quotations from the Torah, the Hebrew word “Chai” (life) and the *hamsa* hand in many varieties. Such accessories are not exclusively worn by women; a large number of men wear them too. The survey also revealed a few people who refuse to wear any accessories or jewels for personal reasons. “I do not wear distinctive signs of origin or religion but I also refuse to wear a wedding ring. I do not like to wear any outward signs of anything.” (Interview Michaela V., Prague, 18.6.2018)



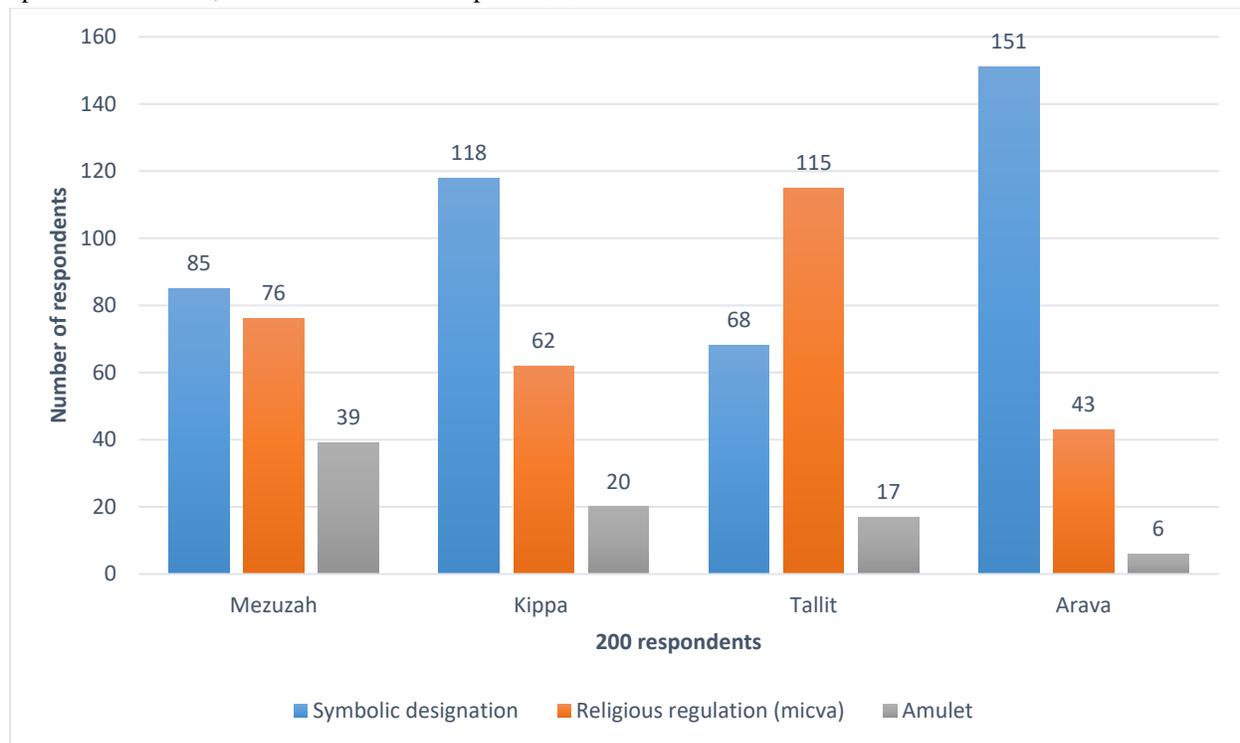
**Fig. 2.** Do you wear any visible Jewish symbols or symbols associated with the Middle East (rings, key rings, bracelets, etc.)?

According to Baudrillard, a family antique has a lower correlation with other things and acts as a single whole, with a kind of authenticity in its value (Baudrillard 1996). An interviewee from the third generation considered her *mezuzah* to be her most valuable family heirloom. She was convinced that her family had owned this religious artefact since her birth. Although she had only a vague idea about the true ritual function, she repeatedly drew the interviewer’s attention to its uniqueness, recognising it as a cultural indicator with a connection to the Jewish past. According to the maker’s mark, the *mezuzah* dates from 1880. Even though the narrator had several ancient Jewish

objects in her home, she considered them to be less interesting since she used them for everyday purposes and associated them with the contemporary cultural system. Undertaking interviews and archival research among the members of the second generation endorses the statement that the context of individual items is more significant than the real value of the items themselves. People often prioritise the complexity of stories related to family objects above their factual reliability.

It often occurs that a member of the third generation is the only one who is still alive and able to maintain the family heirlooms. “Yes, I keep my precious family memories – photos and old documents. I am the oldest member of my family and that is why I safely keep all things that belonged to my ancestors. I am also completing my family tree, not only for my daughters but also for myself. I want to know my place within my extended family. At the moment my daughters are hardly interested in our family history, but I have been working on a document which allows them to know more” (Interview with a Czech emigrant, Charles W., Geneva, 19.7.2018).

The last part of the case study displays the relationship with and perception towards selected Jewish ritual items (*mezuzah*,<sup>2</sup> *kippa*,<sup>3</sup> *tallit*,<sup>4</sup> *aravah*<sup>5</sup>). This graph shows that the chosen items are either symbolic designations or religious regulations rather than simple amulets. All these objects serve people as indispensable spiritual objects or at least as symbols encouraging self-awareness. To indicate the *aravah* mostly as a symbolic designation might show that many respondents do not celebrate Sukkot regularly since it is not one of the high Jewish holidays. A *kippa* is not just a religious order; for many Jews it is a symbolic designation of their identity. A large number of male interviews said that wearing the *kippa* makes them feel like real Jews. The *mezuzah* is the only object that is perceived as an amulet and in some cases was inherited through generations. Whether parents passed on their apartment or house, their children often keep a *mezuzah* on a doorframe.



**Fig. 3.** Perception of selected Jewish objects in second and third generation Jews (LUX+CZ)

<sup>2</sup> This is affixed to the doorpost of Jewish homes to fulfil the *mitzvah*.

<sup>3</sup> A brimless cap, usually made of cloth, worn by Jews to fulfil the customary requirement that the head must be covered.

<sup>4</sup> A fringed garment traditionally worn by religious Jews. The *tallit* has special twined and knotted fringes known as *tzitzit*.

<sup>5</sup> A leafy branch of the willow tree used in a special waving ceremony during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

## 7. Jewish virtual gateway

The aim of my work is to create an interactive, dynamic and inspirational virtual library based on the interface of various international projects (e.g. Sephardi voices, Jewish virtual library and Yiddish sources), where those interested in Jewish modern history can enjoy access to little known Jewish magazines, documents, yearbooks, photos and interviews. The results of this case study will be digitised, anonymised and published online together with photos of representative Jewish objects.

This fact-based electronic tool maintaining modern Jewish culture will facilitate research into contemporary Jewish history. The interface will be user-friendly, comprehensive and intuitive. The goal is not to create an overwhelming encyclopaedia with thousands of entries, but to design an online platform illustrating Jewish microhistory in detail. The website will attract a wide-ranging global audience interested in anything from Jewish daily life to Zionism. The entire digital project should be easily sustainable and updatable by administrators in the future.

The final website, available in several language versions, will be clearly divided into several sections:

- Timeline – composed of crucial milestones in Jewish modern history in Luxembourg, France and Czechoslovakia.
- Visualised datasets of questionnaires together with a basic description.
- Educational section for Jewish youth primarily containing upcoming events such as seminars, language workshops and summer religious courses. Users will also find an archive of past events.
- Bookstore and antiquarian bookshops providing a range of newly published books.
- Thematically classified external links – a reference section containing information about relevant academic institutions, archives, libraries, Jewish centres, Yiddish cultural organisations and internet portals following up Jewish questions.
- News – there will also be a page with online Yiddish, French, Luxembourgish and Czech media (newspapers, magazines and radio programmes).
- Indexed database of interviews.
- Archive of personal stories placed in a research section with all the information needed to access Yiddish documents. It will be possible to search these resources by country and city. There will also be a list of digitised Jewish collections.
- Regional stories based on personal narratives.

I intend to primarily provide visitors with a clearly classified source of information so that they do not need to search thousands of other “Jewish” websites with similar microhistorical issues. Users can freely share their experience and complete and upload files and text via a shared platform.

## 8. Conclusion:

Although it is part of my broader PhD research, this case study also provides another way of interpreting the results of the field survey. The aim of conducting interviews and distributing questionnaires was to provide a public space in which to “give voice” to things that as family heirlooms had been delegated the right to “speak” in the private space of the home. As such, family heirlooms offered an opportunity for guardians to share their knowledge of their ancestors. The study has shown that all items considered as Jewish family heirlooms have a particular value for all Jews across the generations. It is hard to find any specific patterns that apply to all cases. All respondents recognised them as important components of the useful family past; in other words, of a past that contributes to the construction of Jewish identity on the basis of ancestry. The participants may have viewed the value of family heirlooms in a different way, but all of them understood that they represent the family history and are socially significant for preserving Jewish cultural heritage. With regard to the research question, we can reliably affirm that there has been no decrease in the interest in Jewish heirlooms. Younger generations merely conceive of these inherited objects in their own way.

Based on the survey it seems that the third generation is still preoccupied by work and family obligations so they do not dedicate a great amount of time to either religious or family things. Finally yet importantly, the third generation has a greater tendency to display and wear Jewish objects more visibly than previous generations, who tend to hide

them from potential visitors. It is also important to note that the different political regimes do not affect the way of maintaining Jewish family souvenirs and do not influence the importance of these items for cultivating the Jewish collective memory both in the Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia) and Luxembourg.

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