‘Normalization’ of Jewish Women’s Life-Narratives during and after the Communist Dictatorship in Bulgaria

Paper presented at the M&N conference “Diversity in an international context”
Berkeley 1-3. 11. 2006

Assoc. Prof. Daniela Koleva, St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia

The project

In the last days of 2002 I interviewed a medical doctor, her elderly mother and her daughter in the course of a feminist oral history project.[1] The interviews comprised a first part in which the narrator’s life story was elicited with a particular focus on gender roles and power in her family of origin and her own family, on gender issues at the workplace, etc. In a more structured second part, questions were asked about the interviewee’s opinions of gender equality in contemporary Bulgaria and her attitudes to women in politics, to their representations in media and advertising, etc. Where possible, women from different generations of the same family were to be interviewed. Though the interviews concentrated on gender roles, their handing down between generations and their presumed change, the project placed particular emphasis on giving voice to minority women. More than half of all interviewees were of Turkish, Pomak, Jewish, Armenian or Roma origin.

The interviewees

The eldest of the three women I interviewed, Adela (aged 85 at the time of the interview), was born into a Jewish family in the northwestern Bulgarian town of Vidin famous for its ethnic diversity and its large Jewish community in the early 20th century. At high school she became a member of the Hashomer Hatzair movement[2]. She earned a

[1] “Voices of Their Own: Oral History of Women from Five Minorities in Bulgaria”, Bulgarian Association of University Women – Open Society Fund 2002-2003.

[2] Hashomer Hatzair (Hebrew – “The Young Guard”) – socialist Zionist youth movement, founded in Eastern Europe in 1916. Many Jewish youth, affected by the process of modernization that had begun among Eastern European Jewry sought a means of maintaining their Jewish identity and culture outside the shtetl and Orthodox Jewish life. On the other hand, they were troubled by the growing anti-Semitism, which threatened their very existence. In its early stages the movement was heavily influenced by the Scout Movement and by the socialist movement. Hashomer Hatzair stressed the need for the Jewish people to normalize their lives by changing their economic structure (as merchants) and to become workers and farmers, who would settle in

university degree in economics but exercised her profession for only a short period before her marriage[3]. At the age of 30, she married a Bulgarian and gave birth to two children. She had a few chances to emigrate to Palestine during and after WWII – as the Hashomer Hatzair movement demanded from its members – but circumstances always precluded emigration: she did not take the chance in 1940 for she was in the middle of her studies at the university. Neither did she go right after the war, when another chance for illegal emigration appeared: she had to take care of her sick old mother. In 1948, when there was an opportunity to emigrate legally, and most Bulgarian Jews took that chance[4], she had just married and again decided to stay. Her daughter Nadezhda (aged 47) married a Bulgarian as well. She married early in life and had an early divorce. Thereafter, she pursued her career as a medical doctor and raised her daughter Katya almost alone and with Adela's crucial help in the first years after the break-up of her marriage. In the early 1990s, she emigrated to Israel with her daughter and spent there four years – a fact that she hardly ever mentioned in her talk. Katya, my third conversation partner aged 26, not married, had a Master's degree in Cultural Studies and worked at the newly established Jewish museum in Sofia.

The conversations

I first visited Nadezhda in her apartment one December morning just after she had decorated her Christmas tree. Comfortably sitting in an armchair under a Kandinsky poster, she talked at length about her parents' family, her childhood and profession. She was self-contained, ironic, and eloquent about what she was willing to tell and easily withholding

---

the Land of Israel and work the land as *chalutzim* (pioneers). They dreamt of creating in their new homeland a society based on social justice and equality. The first members of the movement went to settle in Palestine in 1919, immediately after WWI. There they found not "a land of milk and honey", but rather a barren, impoverished, undeveloped country lacking all means to maintain them. So they banded together and formed *kibbutzim*, collective settlements. The idea evolved as a result of the conditions they found in Palestine. On the eve of WWII, the Hashomer Hatzair numbered 70,000 members worldwide. The movement was active in leading resistance in the ghettoes and the concentration camps. As the war ended, members of Hashomer Hatzair were among the first to organize and to take part in the illegal immigration to Palestine.

[3] According to the 1934 census, most Jewish women were housewives. Only 6.25 % of them worked outside their homes. See: Vassileva, Boyka, *Evreite v Bulgaria 1944-1952*. [Jews in Bulgaria 1944-1952] Sofia: St Kliment Ohridski University Press 1992, p. 6. Till 1948-49 this share did not significantly change: housewives represent 33 % of all persons who emigrated to Israel. Given that whole families emigrated and that the share of children was 29.15 % (ibid., p. 123), it seems likely that most married women were housewives. However, Adela did not explicitly mention that she followed this pattern after her marriage.

[4] Between October 1948 and May 1949, 32 106 Bulgarian Jews emigrated to Israel and less than 10 000 stayed in Bulgaria. Since then, due to emigration and low birth rate, their number slowly went on diminishing, reaching 6 431 persons in 1956 (Vassileva, op. cit.).

the rest. (One of the reasons was that I did not press her on the issues she avoided.) I realised that interviewing for the first time a person only a few years older than me (my experience before had been with elderly people only), I was beginning to doubt in what I had read about the power relations in the interview: I did not feel "in power", not at all; there was not much reassurance in "sisterhood" either. For about an hour we talked about Nadezhda's life, her family and her profession, mostly about the latter. Not a word was uttered about her being half-Jew. Her 4-year's stay in Israel merited only half a sentence of her talk. The interview questions about women's situation seemed not to "work" very well – I got very categorical and slightly vexed replies to them. Toward the end of the interview, her elder brother came to visit her and the interview ended abruptly and somewhat prematurely. Though I was fascinated by her strong and somehow controversial personality, I gave up the idea of a second interview for I didn't know how to deal with what I felt was a negative reaction to the feminist agenda of the interviewing project.

The talk with Adela was easier: because of her physical condition she did not go out and did not enjoy many visitors in her small flat. She seemed enthusiastic about having somebody to talk to and had prepared for the event: she had put on her white knitted sleeveless jacket (kept for special occasions), she had taken off the cover of her mother's 120-year old sewing machine, and she had thought her talk over. The latter must have been relatively easy for she had already written her memoirs before under the title *Memories of a Vidiner*. Though in that title she identified herself by her native town, a good deal of her talk with me was focussed on "Jewishness". The greater part of her story was about her childhood and her parents' family. She also told in detail about the Jewish youth movement Hashomer Hatzair, which was essential in her formation "as a person". A good deal of Adela's talk revolved around her dreams to emigrate and her "destiny" to stay in Bulgaria, gradually replacing the theme of "Jewishness". She took up willingly the questions about gender roles in the family and about women's situation. As one of the five female students out of 500, she seemed sensitive to the fewer opportunities open for women. But it did not become clear in her talk why she had not struggled for her own fulfilment in this respect.

The conversation with Katya was different from the other two not only because she was present at the interviews with her mother and grandmother. As I was turning on the tape-recorder she remarked that it was the first time she was "on the other side" of the mike, i.e. being interviewed rather than interviewer. Having graduated in Cultural Studies and worked for some time in a radio, she did have some experience both in oral history and journalist interviewing. This set the conversation – for me at least – on an equal footing.

Furthermore, she was in a position to comment on her mother's and grandmother's stories in her own talk. She spent her childhood with her grandmother till the age of 10-11, and since then has lived with her mother. Her 4-year stay in Israel in the early 1990s and the difficulties she and her mother had to face there formed a considerable part of her narrative. Her MA thesis was on the Jewish revival in Bulgaria after 1990 and she had recently begun working at the Jewish Museum in Sofia. Not surprisingly then, her talk was the most reflexive one of the three, as regards both Jewish identity and women's situation. Partly, this was due to her professional activities and certainly also to her better knowledge of the hypotheses and the approach of the project. Her talk was a mixture of impressionistically sketched childhood memories, attempts at self-analysis and comments on her mother's and grandmother's stories.

In such a situation, when the stories of members of three generations in the same family are at hand, two questions arise: the question of intergenerational transmission and that of change. My approach to the three stories is inspired by Daniel Bertaux's method of "social genealogies",[5] and by the project he and a group of Russian sociologists carried in the mid-1990s in Russia on the ways families managed (or failed) to preserve and hand over to younger generations their "cultural capital" after the 1917 revolution.[6] However, while Bertaux is interested primarily in the social context where the individual life paths take place, I will focus on the symbolic and ideological resources for identity construction and on the problematic continuity of self-identity in times of abrupt change.

I will try to demonstrate continuity by comparing the three generations' accounts of their families of origin and loss by elaborating on the theme of Jewishness. I will touch upon the theme of normalization by referring to the larger social context and relating the generations in the family to the respective sociological generations (in the sense introduced by Karl Mannheim[7]). Thus I hope to also point to the usefulness of the biographical approach precisely in periods of significant social transformations that put the construction and maintenance of biographical identity under question.

---

[5] Bertaux, Daniel, *Les recits de vie. Perspective ethnosociologique*. Paris: Nathan 1997; Bertaux, Daniel and Paul Thompson (eds.) *Pathways to Social Class: A Qualitative Approach to Social Mobility*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997.

[6] Semenova, Victoria, Ekaterina Foteeva and Daniel Bertaux (eds.), *Sudby liudei: Rossia, XX vek* [Destinies of people: Russia, 20th century] Moscow: Institute of Sociology 1996.

[7] Mannheim, Karl, *The Problem of Generations*. Oxford University Press, 1952

Generations: questions of transmission and change

Adela spoke affectionately and respectfully of her parents alternating the account of their habits at home on the eve of Sabbath with her own reflections about their influences on herself: her mother taught her all practical skills and her father, who was "very eloquent" and "well-respected in the town" bequeathed his spiritual attitudes:

> He brought us up spiritually with his example. My mother, on the other hand, educated us with her example in the home. Laziness did not exist as a concept for her. Till her very last day she could not understand what it means… […] And my father… used every occasion to educate us with stories and proverbs. […] Spiritually, I take after my father. My mother taught me to work, to work a lot. But in terms of worldview, as a person, I take after my father. He would tell us these stories and we'd put on the table whatever food we had. […] He really loved telling us tales. That's how he taught us integrity and compassion, and also keeping to Jewishness, and taking care of the reputation of the Jews.[8]

According to Adela, her father was "not religious at all" even though he performed the daily rituals, observed the Sabbath and went to the synagogue on religious feasts. Having given up identification with Judaism quite early under the influence of Hashomer Hatzair, and having later adopted communist ideology, Adela may well underestimate her father's religiosity in thinking of him as an intellectual ally and willing to see only his wisdom, moral integrity and loyalty to the Jewish tradition.

Interestingly enough, a similar intellectual proximity between father and daughter seems to have existed in Adela's own family. Her daughter Nadezhda admitted to have been "spiritually" closer to her father, though she spent much more time with her mother:

> My mother is very strong-minded, and I suppose she influenced my personality a lot in everyday matters. She was very active in our education, even too active. She was a controlling, strong person, who had not had the chance to express herself through a professional career. The way things had worked out, she was a housewife. And I suppose she had quite an influence over us. Maybe in contrast to her hyperactivity, dad was quiet, calm, and closed in. Spiritually, I felt much better with him. Maybe he influenced that part of me. So, to sum it up, for everything related to being organized, being orderly, for all these everyday life issues, the influence of my mother has been decisive, while with my father I remained spiritually closer.[9]

---

[8] Krassimira Daskalova (ed.), *Voices of Their Own: Oral History Interviews of Women*. Sofia: Polis Publishers 2004, pp. 17-19. I do not agree with the translator's choice of the word 'Judaism' and prefer 'Jewishness' because Adela is not referring to the religion in this passage but to Jewish identity in a larger and more fluid sense.

[9] Ibid., p. 31.

At the same time, Nadezhda admitted to have hated the "absolute order" that reigned in her parents' home though she had unwillingly carried a lot of it over to her own home. Contrasting her parents' home to that of her friend at school, she found the former "quite depressing" – she didn't like the furniture in their home, the clothes her parents used to wear, the manner they used to behave. Her mother Adela did not seem to be aware of that. What she remembered about her children was that "they were always fighting over books, out of love for the books". She talked less about her daughter, and more of her son, now a professor of medicine, of his problems at school and the conflicts with his father because of his being "clever" but "really lazy". Having learnt from her mother how to run the house, Adela did not insist on her daughter's help:

> Nadia was not interested in the house chores, because I was always at home and I didn't need help, you know. She started studying medicine, and she wanted to study, she was very good. […] I was at home and she didn't know anything, she did not even know how to fry potatoes, or eggs. When she moved out, she learned within a couple of months. Now she's a very good cook. Maybe you've seen her place – very clean, very nice. Now she does what I used to do.[10]

In Adela's narrative, all tensions and conflicts seem to find a peaceful resolution and there is an essential continuity in the "destinies" of successive generations. Young people get to know the world through books. Girls strive after education and are encouraged in that no less than boys are. Sooner or later, women learn to run the house and to do "both women's work and men's work". What she considered her own sacrifice – selling her large inherited apartment to buy two smaller ones for her children and rent a studio for herself – was presented by her in parallel to her father's sacrifice: allowing her to leave home to study at the university although he was seriously ill and needed her care.

Talking of her mother's condition now, Nadezhda seemed impressed by her success in preserving her intellectual capacities and "her strong spirit". She spoke with approval of Adela's interest in politics and the events of the intellectual and cultural life, of her reading a lot, of her selectivity in choosing the TV programmes to watch, in seeking intellectual challenges. At the same time she admitted to keeping in touch with her mother "for moral support" only and not being able to make the "gesture" of engaging in serious intellectual discussions with her.

[10] Ibid., p. 29.

In her turn, Katya, who had spent a few years of her childhood with her grandmother, remembered her as a grassroots activist:

> I remember that a lot of women got together in the local branch of the Fatherland Front[11] and I went with her. She also kept the books for our apartment building, she did all kinds of things. She was very active. From time to time she took me to some awards ceremonies that she had organized, in some halls, with some medals. She was always organizing things, she even tried to order us around the home.[12]

The affection and respect for her grandmother does not preclude Katya from wittily contextualising her appearance and behaviour:

> My grandma would put on some lipstick in holidays, but otherwise, she always exuded this strong spirit of the communist activist, with her grey skirt, the blouse, her tidiness, etc. And I imagine she must have looked exactly like the activists of Hashomer Hatzair movement… I think of her as an aged copy of what she used to be in her youth.[13]

Katya's narrative of her mother was more complex and reflexive:

> When I was younger, I don't know why, but somehow in my mind, my mother was more or less marginal. Things actually changed for the first time, that is, we started getting closer, when we moved to our own flat. That was the first serious trial for me.[14]

An even more serious trial was their stay in Israel where each of them lead her own struggle apart from the other and unable to rely on her help: Nadezhda was constantly at work while Katya struggled to learn the language, to integrate and to form herself "as a person". Both of them did the impossible, as she stated in her talk, at the cost of drifting away from one another:

> Because at that time my mother and I were already becoming quite alienated. She was struggling very hard at the time. And she did well, she managed to achieve things people dream about. At the very first attempt she passed the medical exams and started working in the largest hospital of Tel Aviv. […] She is generally quite a hard-working woman. True, she is very critical, very straightforward, but people

---

[11] The *Otechestven Front* (Fatherland Front) was initially (mid 1940s) a coalition of anti-fascist parties, and later a mass organization in service of the ruling communist party.
[12] *Voices*..., p. 43.
[13] Ibid., p. 44.
[14] Ibid., p. 45.

> seem to have appreciated her, even though they really exploited her. For example, there she had to work 36-hour shifts, so she was constantly at work and she was almost like a zombie. We didn't have anything to say to each other. She didn't have her own circle of friends there, she was very isolated, while I had my circle, we drifted really far apart, really far.[15]

At this moment of the interview, Katya is more appreciative of her mother's achievements and shows more understanding for the hardships she had to struggle with than the two elder women seem to show in respect to their mothers. Judging from some 30 interviews collected during the project that I have read, daughters generally seem to be more critical of their mothers than the other way round. Even when they speak of their mothers with affection and appreciation – as is generally the case – they do not omit the misunderstandings, the conflicts between generations and what they consider to have been their mothers' mistakes. On the contrary, mothers tend to play down the conflicts of the past and seldom criticise their daughters. In this particular case, all three women mentioned the "nightmare" of "three families, four generations" living in one apartment before Adela decided to sell it and buy smaller separate ones. They (particularly the two elder women) stated that it was disastrous for their mutual relations but neither of them expanded on that topic. To my question if they felt they had ever made a sacrifice for the family or for each other (I did not put this question to Adela for she had already presented as such her decision not to leave for Palestine) neither of them replied positively. Nadezhda said that everybody make their little "sacrifices" every day in the sense that one cannot always do what she would like to. Katya found it was too early to talk about sacrifice in her life and she went on thinking aloud:

> That is, sometimes I make these little sacrifices, for example for my mother, or something like that, I would stay at home, if she's ill. Now that I am older, I realize that the years go by and it's much harder for me to accept this, and I am much more sensitive to her situation, you know, that she is alone. And especially on holidays I've often thought that if I have to, I'd stay at home because of that. We have this tradition, we go to the seaside together. Which for me is on the one hand inadmissible, but on the other hand, I have to do it, because I feel that unfortunately, since we are both women, we need to support each other, simply because it is only the two of us.[16]

[15] Ibid., p. 49.
[16] Ibid., p. 54.

Certainly, she may not have reasoned like this in a different conversation, when questions of women's situation were not so central. Even without this statement of gender solidarity between generations, it is clear that there are important continuities within the family: the values of education, of seeking intellectual challenges, of work, most notably professional fulfilment. Nadezhda spoke most readily about her work. Adela was proud with her university education. Pharmacy had been her wish but Jews were not allowed to enrol in medical and pedagogical programmes in the late 1930s when she began her studies, so she did economics. She did not express regret for not having a paid job after her marriage, nor did she explain the reasons for that, but she presented managing her relatives' property as a way to exercise her profession and seemed content with that.[17] Katya admired her mother's professional success in Israel; she herself had begun working on a PhD thesis. The three women also had a common way of spending their free time: reading. None of them specifically mentioned any of these commonalities; Nadezhda decisively claimed that there was nothing she wanted to purposefully take over from her parents' family. Using Bourdieu's concept, we could conclude that the three generations have kept and successfully transmitted the "cultural capital" of the family. Part of that capital could however be their Jewish identity, and here things look quite different.

"Jewishness"

In the first half of Adela's talk, the one concerned with her parents' family, the theme of the Jewish identity – or Jewishness, as she called it – was central. In addition to the sweet memories of the family evenings with her father telling stories, she had quite bitter ones of the hostile attitude towards the Jews in Vidin, of how the children were afraid to go out on the street at Easter: "There were some people who would never forget that we had killed Christ", she explained. In high school, she experienced her Jewish identity both positively – belonging to the Hashomer Hatzair movement, and negatively – suffering the mockery and the threats of many classmates and teachers who would not let her "stand out with anything". At the same time, she pointed out that the pro-communist students and teachers, whom she called "progressive" using the term from the communist political vocabulary, used to support her. Thus she ensured an acceptable "emplotment" for the events that followed (her dream to emigrate and her decision to stay) so that her "destiny"

[17] "…and, what's even better, I started using my education again", ibid, p. 28.

did not appear deplorable. After that moment, there is no more mention of Jewishness in her talk. She travelled to Israel to visit with relatives, there were relatives from Israel visiting quite a lot, and constant contacts with them were maintained between visits. But Adela summarized all of these in one sentence only referring to the improvement of her financial situation and to the use she finally made of her profession. Herself a communist, married to a communist, she had been staunch in giving up any form of religious identification. Marrying a Bulgarian and staying in Bulgaria while her kin emigrated, she was not able (or motivated) to sustain her Jewish identity through tradition either.

Jewishness, and the time spent in Israel, made a conspicuous silence in Nadezhda's story. Katya suggested that this was because that period was very difficult and her mother was reluctant to return to it in her memory. While this may very well be true, it must be noted that Nadezhda's case was also one of the so called 'split mind' typical of the communist everyday: the inappropriateness of any mention of one's feelings, personal attitudes and life strategies – of exhibiting one's private life – in a presentation of one's 'public' personality[18]. The situation of the interview was for Nadezhda a 'public' situation where her private attitudes ought not to be on display. Following Luisa Passerini's advice: "Taking silence into account means watching out for the links between forms of power and forms of silence"[19], Nadezhda's silence can be interpreted as an echo of the silence imposed by the communist authorities on the multicultural realities of Bulgarian society.

Thus, the family expert on the subject of "Jewishness" turned out to be Katya, the youngest. Nothing of her understanding of "Jewishness" was handed down by her mother and grandmother. She remembered no mention even of the word "Jew" in her childhood though relatives from abroad used to visit her grandmother's apartment and to talk in a language that was familiar neither to herself, nor to her mother and uncle. She remembered Adela's attempts to teach her that language without explaining what it was, and her own resistance to those attempts. It was only when she and her mother settled in Tel Aviv that she started to learn about Jewish history, tradition and religion. During that period, she made great efforts to learn Hebrew and did it so well that she was the only immigrant who was allowed to sit for the matriculation exam in Jewish literature and history (instead of maths and biology).

---

[18] Niethammer, Lutz, "Der Prügelknabe", in Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, Dorothee Wierling, *Die Volkseigene Erfahrung: eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR*. Berlin: Rowolt 1991

[19] Passerini, Luisa, "Memories between silence and oblivion", in Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.) Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory. London: Routledge 2003, pp 238-254, p. 249.

When she came back to Bulgaria in 1995 and enrolled at the university, she discovered that a revival of "Jewishness" had begun: an interest in Jewish traditions, rituals, history and language had been stirred among the Jewish community in Sofia. Jewish practices were the myth that made it possible to construct new identities. People sought to organise their values and their practices in accordance with their cultural belonging rather than in terms of their formal citizenship or political loyalties. Furthermore, the very fact of belonging to the Jewish community offered access to networks for jobs, education, and support from abroad, etc. While her mother was annoyed by all those who "played at being Jews", Katya found new opportunities for herself. She was needed as a translator and teacher of Hebrew. In spite of her young age, she had become an "expert"! Though in her talk she would not quite accept this qualification, she was confident enough in her knowledge to explain to me her grandmother's limited perspective and to caution me against taking all she had said at face value:

> My grandmother, from a modern perspective, always presents things differently. […] She had no way to learn about these things. And I think she doesn't understand them well.[20]

Nevertheless, in her talk Katya expressed her regret about having only *studied* Jewish traditions instead of really *adopting* them from her family. It is not clear whether and to what extent this deficit is felt in terms of personal identity or of professional competence. Maybe she feels that she lacks enough "insider" knowledge that might prove essential for her work. But in her words there also seems to surface a quest for "roots" that can not be motivated by professional ambition:

> In a lot of respects, I have a lot to learn. Tons. But the easiest way to learn about tradition is to follow it. For me this means following it in a real life environment. And I don't feel the need to do this, I don't feel this as mine, I never have. While I was in Israel, I followed the Israeli way of life. Yet it didn't really work because we had a very cold, unpleasant, bleak home. Practically, I had no family there. So, even over there, these things never really came back, they were never established. And I practically know that I am not going to pass them on to my children either. I don't have the motivation. Traditions are a great thing and it's good to know them, because you feel you belong, and that's important for you.

[20] Ibid., p. 50.

This is only one of a few reflections on traditions in Katya's narrative. It is interesting that the youngest of the three interviewees is the one most concerned with the theme of traditions and Jewish identity. Living in an environment of alternative possibilities, Katya has a more complex attitude towards the "cultural capital" of the family: she seems to be aware and to regret the loss of a part of that could have enriched her life and her personality. Her professional commitments, the fact that she has learned "Jewishness" from books seems only to increase her sensitivity to this topic.

The three stories are interesting from the point of view of how family, gender; ethnicity and profession can serve as anchors of personal identity and how their dynamics changes between generations. They can help reformulate the idea of generation following Mannheim's conception but in a different way: from generations in the family to sociological generations as "communities of remembering". Adela belongs to the generation that suffered the repressions following the anti-Semitic Law for Defence of the Nation (1941) and the threat of being deported to the death camps during WWII. Her involvement in the Hashomer Hatzair movement and later in the Communist party made acceptable her choice to stay in Bulgaria while her kin emigrated. Having herself suffered from exclusion for being a Jew in her youth, Adela has abandoned Jewish practices and has stopped being a *homo ethnicus*. She became a *homo politicus* asserting "progressive" communist values above ethnic ones. Thus she virtually deprived her children of the chance to construct an identity as members of a minority group. True, she did not have her husband's support in that, and the larger social environment was not favourable either. Anti-Semitism was not an issue, but the Bulgarian "socialist nation" was constructed as a monolith from a social, ethnic and ideological perspective. If they were to be accepted, Jews from Adela's generation who stayed in communist Bulgaria had to be loyal to the system and its ideology. They were subject to a subtle, indirect coercion to purge their memory of their religious and ethnic singularity, and to suppress elements of their culture for the sake of integration.

Nadezhda did not have any choice of ethnic identity till the age of 40 and after that she did not seem to need one. While Adela strove all her life to be accepted in the Bulgarian society, Nadezhda's belonging to it was never an issue. That she was half-Jew was not an issue either. This does not seem to have been essential for her. It was not something to try to forget about but also not something that guided any choices in her life except one – the emigration to Israel. She experienced neither ethnic humiliation nor ethnic

pride; she did not take her ethnicity to be problematic. Neither was it salient in the way she conceptualised herself. Nadezhda only used her Jewish origin as a chance for changing her life at a certain point[21]. In the quest for Jewish identity during the 1990s, people of Nadezhda's generation, who grew up during socialism, came to be referred to as "the lost generation" for they had not kept their Jewish memory. In this case of loss and re-vitalisation of Jewish identity we are confronted with an example of deliberate amnesia driven by the desire and the necessity to get integrated into the majority. When after 1990 re-valorisation and indeed re-invention of Jewish identity has become possible, it has been met with certain resistance because of its all too obvious inventedness (Nadezhda). Nevertheless, there remains the feeling of loss of symbolic resources that could have enriched the narrators' lives and personalities (Katya). Thus the stories demonstrate how different social situations give rise to different versions of normality.

Both Adela and Nadezhda seem to have been confronted in certain periods of their lives with the necessity to reconcile an "official" and a "private" version of their selves[22], a phenomenon typical of the communist everyday reality where the official public life and its language differed markedly from the sphere of private life, and encroached on it in a number of ways. This colonisation took different forms and reached different levels of intensity in Adela's case (early decades of communist totalitarianism) and in Nadezhda's case (later decades of communist rule when the social contract had significantly changed). Katya's case points to the narrow-mindedness of the view of the integration of the minorities into the Bulgarian society based on an over-simplification of the historical context and the resulting reduction of integration exclusively to political and national loyalties.

[21] According to a Russian joke that emerged in the 1990s, 'Jewishness was not an ethnicity, but a means of transportation'. This seems to describe to some extent Nadezhda's case.
[22] See Niethammer, op. cit.; id., Biographie und Biokratie: Nachdenken zu einem westdeutschen Oral History-Projekt in der DDR fünf Jahre nach der deutschen Vereinigung (Bericht auf der internationalen Oral History-Konferenz 1995, Sao Paulo) 1995.