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Yidische tates forming Jewish families

Experiences of intermarried Finnish Jewish men



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ABSTRACT • Jewish communities often do not endorse the idea of intermarriage, and Orthodox Judaism opposes the idea of marrying out. Intermarriage is often perceived as a threat that may jeopardise Jewish continuity as children of such a relationship may not identify as Jews. When a Jewish woman marries out, her children will in any case become Jewish by *halakbah* – the Jewish law – by which Judaism is inherited from mother to child – and thus usually faces less difficulties over acceptance in Jewish communities. Even though the Torah speaks of patrilineal descent, in post-biblical times, the policy was reversed in favour of the matrilineal principle, and children of Jewish men and non-Jewish women must therefore go through the conversion process if they wish to join a Jewish congregation according to most Jewish denominational requirements. The aim of this article is to analyse what happens when Jewish men, who belong to Finland’s Orthodox communities, marry out. Do they ensure Jewish continuity, and raise their children Jewish, and how do they act as *Yidische tates* – Jewish fathers? If yes, how do they do so, and what problems do they face? These questions are answered through an analysis of thirteen semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with male members of the Jewish Community of Helsinki and Turku in 2019–20.

Introduction

The increasing diversity of Finland is also reflected in its Jewish communities, where, despite the small size of the congregational memberships, the mix of religious views, cultures, languages and nationalities is vast (Weintraub 2017; Illman 2019; Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2019). Recent studies of local Jewish communities show that the number of intermarriages in the local congregations is high and has affected many of the congregational policies (Czimbalmos 2019, 2020a, 2020b). The various denominations of Judaism take different approaches to the questions of intermarriage¹ and officiating over

intermarriages; it is important to highlight that Jewish denominations and communities are not unified. Generally, Orthodox and Conservative Judaism regards marriage as a union between two Jews, but some Conservative rabbis are eager to initiate a

has originally identified as non-Jewish. I use the term regardless of whether the spouse has changed their original religious affiliation after becoming involved with their partner. One of the reasons for this choice is that I found the term ‘interfaith’ to be inaccurate in the current case, as the majority of my informants highlighted their connections with the cultural aspects of Judaism, rather than to faith or belief. They often also mentioned the same about their spouses and their memberships of their own religious communities or the lack of such membership.

1 I use ‘intermarriage’ as a general term; I refer to marriages in which one partner identifies as Jewish, and the other spouse

change. Certain rabbis of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements may even agree to officiate over ceremonies between a Jew and a non-Jew, while some may not.² The most commonly raised concern against intermarriage is the threat that an intermarriage may jeopardise Jewish continuity, as it can result in assimilation and in children of such a relationship not identifying as Jews (see e.g. Fishman 2006, 2015; McGinity 2014; Hirt *et al.* 2015; Thompson 2013; Mehta 2018). When a Jewish woman marries out, her children will be considered Jewish by the Jewish law, and thus may face fewer difficulties in their acceptance in Jewish communities. Children of Jewish men, however, must often go through the conversion process if they wish to join a Jewish congregation that does not accept patrilineal descent.³ What happens when Jewish men in Finnish Jewish Orthodox communities marry out? Do they ensure Jewish continuity, and raise their children Jewish? If yes, how do they do so? What traditions do they practise in their homes? The aim of this article is to answer these questions by analysing thirteen semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with male members of the Jewish Community of Helsinki and Turku in 2019–20.

2 See further on this topic e.g. Knopf 2019; Saxe *et al.* 2016.

3 The Reform and Reconstructionist movements accept patrilineal descent. The attitudes towards patrilineal ancestry have been shifting within the Conservative/Masorti community on the local and international levels. Orthodox Judaism does not accept patrilineal ancestry. It is important to highlight, however, that these movements of Judaism are not unified.

Background and literature

As the sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman concludes, much has been written and spoken about specific topics within Jewish families, such as intermarriages, but no systematic analysis has so far been made of the intersecting changes and their implications for our understandings of gender and sexuality, love and marriage, and family formation (Fishman 2015). Recent international studies have already outlined how the growing number of intermarriages is a current phenomenon within Jewish communities, for example in the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, the United Kingdom and the United States (see e.g. Graham 2004; Fishman 2006, 2013, 2015; Thompson 2013; Berman 2015; Hirt *et al.* 2015; Primiano 1997). In a recent publication, *The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World* (2011), Elena Maryles Sztokman investigates Orthodox Jewish men who identify with egalitarian or quasi-egalitarian religious experiences.

When it comes to the subject of families in which intermarriages influence everyday Jewish lives and religious practices, most of the qualitative studies were conducted in the United States. In her work *Jewish in their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples are Changing American Judaism* (2013), Jennifer Thompson demonstrates that intermarried Jews 'conform to religious rules and traditions in their own ways, for reasons having to do with family and self rather than God' (p. 164). Another recent work on the subject, which focuses on Christian–Jewish interfaith⁴ families, is Samira K. Mehta's *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian–Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* (2018).

4 The author specifically uses the word 'interfaith'.

Her interest primarily lies in ‘how interfaith nuclear families are imagined, policed, and innovated’ (p. 7). Her findings suggest that robust creativity is applied in the privacy of the interfaith homes she studies. On the specific question of Jewish men marrying out, one of the most comprehensive works is Keren McGinity’s book entitled *Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Inter-marriage and Fatherhood* (2014). McGinity investigates experiences of intermarried Jewish men, and argues that the gendered identity of her informants, which grew out of their religious and cultural background, enables them to raise Jewish children – often in Jewish communities that are more liberal and thus accept patrilineal descent. This change in moving to more liberal communities ‘over time entailed an enhancement, not diminishment, of their Jewish identity’ (p. 193).

In the Nordic context, a questionnaire entitled ‘Questions about Jewish life’, distributed in Sweden, Norway and Finland, also addressed issues of intermarriage and Jewish identity, which concluded that Finnish Jews are the most open among the three communities when it comes to the question of marrying a non-Jew (Dencik 2009). Recent works by Andrew Buckser have dealt with matters concerning Danish Jewry, touching upon the questions of intermarriage, patrilineal descent and conversion (Buckser 2003a, 2003b).

From the studies specifically dealing with Finnish Jewry, the latest that specifically focuses on intermarried Finnish Jewish men is a Master’s thesis written by Marianne Kivijärvi in 2002, with an emphasis on conceptions of Finnish Jewish men about the conversion processes of their spouses (Kivijärvi 2003). In addition, the studies of Lars Dencik and, as mentioned earlier, Svante Lundgren have also touched upon the issue of intermarriage (Lundgren 2002; Dencik 2009), both of them

from a quantitative perspective. Recent studies concerning Jewish religiosity and Finnish Jewish family life include my own and Elina Vuola’s publications in a recent issue of *Nordisk judaistik – Scandinavian Jewish Studies*. While I focused on the recent historical developments that led to and affected intermarriage rates and religious practices connected to them (Czibalmos 2019), Vuola studied Finnish Jewish women by applying intersectional perspectives to their gender and minority status (Vuola 2019). In addition, I have written about conversionary in-marriages within the local communities (Czibalmos 2020b) and in a recent article investigated the experiences and reflections of intermarried women (Czibalmos 2020a). The interviews presented in the latter two studies are from the same set of ethnographic data used for the current article. In the latter article, “‘Everyone does Jewish in their own way’: vernacular practices of intermarried Finnish Jewish women’ (Czibalmos 2020a), I structured the ethnographic material along four key domains of negotiations. These domains recurred in the interviews as matters around which Jewish women in the Finnish communities centre their traditions. I found that the observance of Jewish holidays and traditions, *kashrut*,⁵ the Jewish upbringing of the common children and *brit milah*⁶ were the most important topics of negotiations when Jewish women in the Finnish Jewish communities constructed their (everyday) Jewish practices (Czibalmos 2020a). Recent research shows that women tend to be more religious than men all over the world (see e.g. Baker and Whitehead 2016; Schnabel 2017). This, however, may also be due to the ‘overemphasis on Christian research’, for

5 *Kashrut*: the set of Jewish dietary laws.

6 *Brit milah*: circumcision of Jewish male children.

example in the United States (Schnabel *et al.* 2018: 81), which regularly concludes that the gender gap is more pronounced among Christian groups than among other religious communities in the country.

Vernacular practices of Finnish Jewish men in general and intermarried men in Orthodox Jewish communities in particular have not been the focus of scholarly attention so far. In this article, I build my analysis particularly on the framework of vernacular religion, and on my own findings about the vernacular practices of intermarried Finnish Jewish women (Czibalmos 2020a). Even though American Jewry differs significantly from that of Finland in its size and in the vast number of communities and denominations, I found USA-based scholarship particularly useful for my analysis despite the fact that the works used in this study draw primarily on non-Orthodox Jewish communities. Finnish Jewish communities may be Orthodox officially, but their membership is diverse and may identify as other than Orthodox when it comes to Jewish religious practices – as indicated in my earlier contributions (e.g. Czibalmos 2020a, 2020b). In addition, non-quantitative research into Jewish intermarriages in Europe is very limited. Therefore, this study fills a void in the existing research.

Historical overview

Currently, there are two Jewish communities operating in Finland: one in Helsinki and one in Turku. Together, they comprise less than 1500 members.⁷ Their origin dates

7 In addition to the people registered in these two congregations, there are several other Jews living in the country. Chabad Lubavitch is also present in Finland, officially in form of a non-profit association (Suomen Chabad Lubavitch ry, Eng. The Chabad Lubavitch of Finland). Addi-

tionally, in the summer of 2019 a new non-profit association 'Suomen reformi-juutalaiset ry' (Eng. Association of Reform Jews of Finland) was established.

8 *Aliyah*: to rise to the Torah to read from it.

back to the nineteenth century, when Tsar Nicholas I established the Cantonist military school system. The Finnish Jews mainly arrived in Finland as young soldiers in the process of their military education (Torvinen 1989; Czibalmos and Pataricza 2019). They gained the right to receive Finnish citizenship in 1917. In the same year, the Civil Marriage Act (CMA) was accepted by the Finnish parliament, making it possible for Jewish and non-Jewish citizens to marry through the process of civil marriage ceremonies (CMA; Czibalmos 2018, 2019; Czibalmos and Pataricza 2019). Shortly after the Civil Marriage Act took effect, in 1922, the Freedom of Religion Act (FRA) was also accepted by the Finnish parliament (UVL267/122). The rise of intermarriages and the differences between the Finnish and the Jewish laws resulted in difficulties for the local Jewish communities (Czibalmos 2018, 2019). In the 1930s, Rabbi Simon Federbusch issued a *taqqanah*, a rabbinical statute, that denied intermarried men in the Jewish Community of Helsinki the right to do the *aliyah*.⁸ According to the FRA, a child was to follow the father's religious affiliation unless the parents agreed otherwise in a written agreement. This meant that Finnish law required the Helsinki congregation to register halakhically non-Jewish children in the congregational membership books, which the leadership of the community did not support. The Finnish authorities saw this merely as an administrative matter and did not regard it as conflicting with the Jewish law, and thus required the congregation to comply with the law and insert the children in question in the membership books. The

tionally, in the summer of 2019 a new non-profit association 'Suomen reformi-juutalaiset ry' (Eng. Association of Reform Jews of Finland) was established.

8 *Aliyah*: to rise to the Torah to read from it.

congregational solution was to set up a protocol for childhood conversions, which did not include the requirement that children of a non-Jewish mother had to convert to Judaism (Czimbalmos 2018, 2019). In 1969, the law on the freedom of religion was reversed: from 1970 onwards, a child was to follow the mother's religious affiliation unless otherwise decided by the parents (LUM767/1969). The same law was revised again in 2003; the child's religion was henceforth to be decided by both parents together. After the child turns twelve, the decision is to be made by parents and the child jointly (UVL2003/453).⁹ Nevertheless, the *giyur*¹⁰ of the non-Jewish parent – especially in the case of non-Jewish women – is still encouraged by both communities. After 1977, the conversion rates of adults in the local congregations started to increase, and today, conversionary in-marriages¹¹ are very frequent in the local congregations (Czimbalmos 2020b). Over recent decades, the congregational membership has changed significantly, and the rapid globalisation of Finnish society has affected the Jewish communities as well (Weintraub 2017; Illman 2019). There is a high number of female converts in the congregations – especially the Jewish Community of Helsinki – making the conversions a gendered phenomenon, partially because of the issue of matrilineal versus patrilineal descent, which I have already elaborated on in two earlier contributions (Czimbalmos 2020a, 2020b). As Orit Avishai has pointed out, 'religion is shaped by gender logics, where gender norms are articulated, negotiated, and subverted' (Avishai 2016: 264). This is perhaps shown in practice in the

Jewish Community of Helsinki, where today, the protocol of childhood conversions is still valid, and children with one Jewish parent can be accepted into the Jewish kindergarten and the Jewish school in Helsinki. Until March 2018, however, male children of Jewish mothers were required to be circumcised in order to be admitted. This decision was mainly a reflection of the internal discussions of the congregation. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that circumcision is generally not practised in Finland among the non-Jewish and non-Muslim populations.

Methodology and research material

The primary sources of this study are interviews conducted between February 2019 and February 2020 within the Minhag Finland research project, which specifically focuses on Finnish Jewish everyday lives, with members of the Jewish Communities of Helsinki and Turku (see the project's website). Out of the more than hundred interviews collected within this project, thirteen were chosen for this study. The selection criteria for the study were that the informant identified as male and is or was married to a person, who does not (or did not previously) identify as Jewish. Regarding the age of the informants, the oldest was born in the early 1930s and the youngest in the late 1960s. The age span of the informants is limited for a simple reason: when assessing the demographics of the membership in the congregation, I found that men who were born after this period are either in endogamous marriages, not married yet, not members of the communities or simply not active. Thus, they were not represented in the ethnographic sample. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews mainly focused on aspects of Finnish Jewish everyday life and the rituals within their families and their communities. This included topics such

9 For further information on the topic see Czimbalmos 2018, 2019.

10 *Giyur*: conversion to Judaism.

11 Marriages in which the non-Jewish spouse decided to convert to Judaism.

as dietary habits, family life and relations to society at large.

The data derived from the interview material presents the personal narratives of the informants and thus should not be used as a source of generalisation; however, they definitely highlight a pattern within the local congregations. In order to gather sufficient background information and to place the interview narratives in context, relevant sources from the National Archives of Finland and from the on-site archives of the Jewish Community of Helsinki were used. The archival material is mainly used in this study to establish an understanding of the recent historical events in the congregation and the experiences of its membership. This approach contributes to the efficient application of the main theoretical framework – *vernacular religion* – to this study. The experiences displayed in this study involve living persons engaged through both interviews and archival materials. To preserve the integrity of the informants and their communities, I use Yiddish nicknames instead of the real names of the informants throughout this study. The primary reason for this is to avoid the coincidental use of their Jewish names as acronyms and to highlight that many congregants in the two congregations still perceive Yiddish as ‘authentic’, owing to the communities’ cultural-historical roots. In addition to the acronymisation, information that would reveal the identities of the interviewees was left out or slightly altered, to preserve their anonymity.¹²

12 Participation in the interviews was voluntary and the informed consent of the informants was obtained at the beginning of the interviews. A contract outlining the rights and responsibilities of both interviewees and researchers was signed with all participants. The data use and

Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this study mainly lie in the literature of interfaith family lives mentioned above, and are integrated with Leonard Primiano’s framework of vernacular religion, which is explained as ‘religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it’ (Primiano 1995: 44). The concept supports the analysis of beliefs in relation to practices, including private, historical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the approach includes materiality, embodiment and power when interpreting aspects of everyday religious lives of groups and individuals. The approach is similar to the approach of lived religion (Ammerman 2016; McGuire 2008) but offers a tool for researching how theologically unsystematic worldviews take form in the encounter between everyday practices and institutional religion past and present. The study of lived religion is developed within the fields of sociology and history of religion, and it emphasises ‘the dynamic and ambivalent nature as rooted in the material and social realities within which individuals live their lives’ (Kupari and Vuola 2020: 10). For a sufficient understanding of vernacular practices, the contextual and communal manifestations of religion are also to be considered when interpreting the practices themselves (*ibid.*). Vernacular religion connects local beliefs to contextual attributes: to specific historical, social, political and even ecological conditions in which religious practices and beliefs exist and in which they are interpreted (Romashko 2020).

Marion Bowman suggests that vernacular religion includes three interconnected components of religion: official (primarily

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concerning theological teaching, ritual and institutionalised religion), folk (connected to common practices and beliefs alongside the official religion) and individual (each individual's understanding of religion and its role in their life) (Bowman 2004: 6, 2014: 102). Including the personal element in the analytic framework underlines how the concept of vernacular religion differs from the concept of folk religion. Consequently, Primiano's concept 'highlights the power of the individual and communities of individuals to create and re-create their own religion' (Primiano 2012: 383). Vernacular religion is not a dichotomy that can be positioned as an opposite to official religion, but rather a concept that entails both official and non-official aspects of religiosity. Thus, it is an appropriate framework for describing practices closely related to and informed by, yet also located outside, the official dogmatic of religious institutions (Bowman and Valk 2012: 3–7). Vernacular religion therefore must be studied in connection with the frames of institutional religion.

Recent research in the United States about Jewish men and women involved in intermarriages questions the assumption that these individuals cut their connections and ties to their Jewish communities and to Judaism when they marry out (McGinity 2014: 1–4). Intermarried Jewish men who raise Jewish children often face exclusion from organised Jewish communities. According to most denominations of Judaism,¹³ children of Jewish men and non-Jewish women are not considered Jewish under Jewish law (see

e.g. McGinity 2014; Fishman 2013). In the United States, the policy debates of the Reform movement¹⁴ connected Jewish identity with participation in Jewish communal life, shifting it away from the legal and cultural to an affiliation-based understanding of Jewish life within the movement (Mehta 2018: 82). Keren McGinity stresses that men's narratives within her group of informants illustrate both the fluidity of Jewish identity and the strong impact – encouraging or discouraging – that rabbinical authorities can have on the acceptance and appropriation of Jewish identities and affiliations (McGinity 2014: 59). Nevertheless, research indicates that where intermarriage is common, and ritual observance and institutional affiliation is in decline, genetic essentialism and biological discourse offer a powerful link with tradition and provide both meaning and community (Tenenbaum and Davidman 2007: 444). Intermarriage can thus deepen men's Jewish identity, and Jewish fathers' hopes of authorising the Jewishness of their children and also of securing communal and familial validation when doing so. In addition, they experience a reawakening of their Jewish identity when they marry (McGinity 2014: 60–70). In the current case, the communities and the surrounding context probably contributed to their doing so.

13 After lengthy debates, the Reform movement made the historic decision to accept patrilineal descent in a Reform rabbi's manual in 1961, and then to change the matrilineal standard officially in 1983 (McGinity 2014: 54; RMR 1983).

14 According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* 'Reform Judaism, a religious movement that has modified or abandoned many traditional Jewish beliefs, laws, and practices in an effort to adapt Judaism to the changed social, political, and cultural conditions of the modern world. Reform Judaism sets itself at variance with Orthodox Judaism by challenging the binding force of ritual, laws, and customs set down in the Bible and in certain books of rabbinic origin (e.g., the Talmud).'

Yidishe tates¹⁵

The three components Bowman writes about (2004: 6) are very much present in the Finnish Jewish milieu, where the official institution and its theological teachings (i.e. the Orthodox *halakhab*) and commonly accepted practices (i.e. marrying out) and the personal interpretations of official ideas are in a dynamic interplay within the communities and among their members. This is also shown in the recent history, for example of the Jewish Community of Helsinki, where (as earlier indicated) the growing number of intermarriages has affected the congregation and has eventually shifted some of its practices and institutional requirements. Initially, intermarried Jewish men were not allowed to rise to the Torah, but eventually, they did regain their rights, whereas women often simply left the community after marrying out (Czibalmos 2019; JCH, HrJFH; NA, Vih). The data currently analysed, as well as the archival material, show, for instance, that the decision to allow children of non-Jewish mothers and Jewish fathers to be registered in the congregations was mainly created to accommodate the needs of intermarried Jewish men – in addition to the obvious legal pressure from the Finnish authorities before the ruling (see Czibalmos 2019). This is not to imply that intermarried men receive a more positive treatment within the congregation than their female counterparts. Anshel, a male informant who was born in the late 1940s experienced serious rejection from his family when deciding to marry a non-Jewish woman, says: ‘My mother said *kaddish*.¹⁶ Usually women don’t say *kaddish*,

but she said that *kaddish*, and we didn’t talk to each other for four years ... even if we lived close. ... And then my mother’s family drove me away from the community.’ Saying *kaddish* means that Anshel’s mother considered him dead after marrying a non-Jewish woman. Eventually, they got into contact again, but Anshel and two of his children were affected by the rejection on the part of his parents and stayed rather distant from the community in their adulthood. Itzik said that he was ‘raised in the understanding that it was not allowed to marry anyone but a Jew, that was a “tight sieve”. So, his first marriage was to a Jew. Aizik’s family, for their part, regarded his marriage as a ‘catastrophe’, and even though his wife later converted and all was settled peacefully, his family still do not consider her Jewish. The other informants did not talk about the pressure that came from their families, and rather talked about their intermarriages as obvious choices in light of the small pool of potential spouses among Finnish Jewry.

As mentioned earlier, in the interviews I conducted with intermarried women in Finnish Jewish communities (Czibalmos 2020a), I identified four domains that were repeatedly mentioned and perceived as crucial in the identity work and negotiations that took place among the women and their families. These domains were matters that my informants specifically talked about and brought up, and also served as useful tools for me to present the material in a more structured way. As opposed to these four main domains identified in the earlier study, the internal discussions of Jewish men and their families studied in this article focused mainly on three domains. The lack of their focus on the domain of *brit milah* is most likely due to the contextual attribute (Kupari and Vuola 2020), namely the requirements of conversion and the institutional framework

15 Jewish fathers in Yiddish.

16 *Kaddish* or mourner’s *kaddish* is said in honour of the deceased.

in which the informants of this study were socialised. In the Finnish Jewish communities, the key to understanding the 'ongoing interpretations of negotiations of religion' (Primiano 1995: 51) lies in the understanding of the Finnish context and the Jewish congregational policies affected by it. Orthodox Judaism does not accept patrilineal ancestry as a basis of one's Jewishness; therefore children of Jewish fathers but non-Jewish mothers must go through the conversion process according to the congregational regulations – which came into practice in the second half of the twentieth century. One prerequisite of conversion is circumcision in the case of male children. Therefore, to allow children to become members of the Jewish congregations in Finland and thus make it possible for them to become part of institutional Jewish life in the country, *brit milah* was a non-negotiable act (unless medically opposed) until March 2018. Most of my informants viewed circumcision not only as a ritual act, but as a specific marker of Jewish identity, a 'self-evident act', which is necessary to be able to register their children in the communities and the Jewish school. As these were particularly important for them, they had never considered not proceeding with the *brit milah*. In some cases, for example when my informants did not have male children, they referred to it as something that 'would not have been a problem'. Zisse was the only one who expressed his complete disagreement with the procedure, and said he had found other ways to ensure the Jewish identity of his children:

it was not even my wife [who refused]. It was only me. I thought that such a small child – eight days old – and I thought that it is complete bullshit, and a excuse that all the community members say 'he is so small that he doesn't feel anything'. It is

the other way around ... and I think it is a traumatic experience. ... And I decided that my sons can decide when they turn 18. And they couldn't go to Gan [the Jewish kindergarten]. Now they could. It [the situation] progressed. But then, I was like the Jewish Luther!

Zisse's children had their *bonei mitzvoth*¹⁷ in Israel, in a non-Orthodox congregation, where circumcision was not required. He was not able to choose a congregation in which his children's Jewish identity would not be questioned – as for example many of Keren McGinity's informants were (McGinity 2014: 71) – as no such community existed in Finland at the time. Still, he found a solution to allow them to be *bonei mitzvoth*. We do not know whether Zisse would have enrolled his children in a Jewish educational institution in which circumcision was not a requirement, but his case definitely reflects on the contextual attributes that are to be taken into consideration (Romashko 2020) when utilising a vernacular approach. The other three domains identified in my previous research (Jewish holidays and rituals, *kasbrut* and Jewish education of future offspring) were similarly central for the interviewed men and their families – however, the last was definitely the most topical in their narratives.

Another important contextual aspect to be taken into consideration is that childhood conversions were widely practised in the Jewish Community of Helsinki from the 1950s onwards (see e.g. Czimbalmos 2019; NA, Bmm 2.9.1954, 3.5.1954, 12.10.1953, 2.11.1953, 19.12.1955). In 1973, the community issued a statement that defined the congregational protocol for accepting children of non-Jewish mothers into the

17 *Bonei mitzvoth*: coming of age ceremony.

community, in which they established the same requirements as earlier. According to the protocol, children of non-Jewish mothers could become members of the congregation if their parents agreed on the Jewish upbringing of the children and on allowing them to go through the conversion process, at the latest before their coming of age ceremonies – 12 years for girls and 13 for boys. The mother of the children was not required to convert to Judaism, however (NA, Kii; Czimbalmos 2018, 2019). Despite the protocol, many women still decide to convert to Judaism – and as later examples will show, they often brought stricter levels of observance to their homes – which is in line with earlier findings of research on the subject in the United States (see e.g. Fishman 2006). Dovid, Anshel, Beynish, Mendel, Aizik and Herschel all related that their wives were interested in Judaism, and thus decided to convert. The wife of Aizik went through two conversions as her first one – after which she could already join the community – was not accepted by a later rabbi of the congregation. All of my informants explicitly said that they never asked, nor did they want to pressure, their wives into proceeding with the conversion. They did not want to resume responsibility for their wives' conversions. McGinity notes similar tendencies in her own research (McGinity 2014). Interestingly, Herschel was the only one who reflected on the 'importance of the matrilineal principle' to any extent when talking about Judaism with his wife. In view of the already existing protocol of childhood conversions, however, it can be assumed that the decisions of the wives who did convert to Judaism had little to do with 'congregational requirements'. Nevertheless, the conversion of female spouses appears to be significantly more common than that of the male spouses in the communities under study, which has also been indicated in

research into intermarried women (Czimbalmos 2020a) and into conversionary in-marriages (Czimbalmos 2020b). It is to be supposed, regardless of the congregational policies, that there is still gendered pressure during the processes of Jewish conversion, which rests on the requirements of the Jewish law (*ibid.*), but, as the current material shows, 'religious household labour' (Thompson 2013: 118) may also make women's conversion easier, as it facilitates their acceptance in the communities.

In the parallel study on intermarried women, most of the informants came from intermarried families themselves. Among the current informants, only three men had mixed religious backgrounds: Herschel and Issur are sons of conversionary in-marriages – their mothers converted to Judaism before their births. Issur interestingly referred to himself as a 'half-Jew from the father's side' and concluded that on the maternal side, he is not Jewish 'regardless of the conversion of this mother': he regarded it as a 'complete formality', which perhaps was proceeded with in order to make sure that her future children would be considered Jewish and in order for his father to be in an endogamous marriage. Arke was the child of a mixed marriage and his mother did not convert to Judaism but agreed to bring him up Jewish. In addition, as opposed to the frequency of women who had Muslim spouses in the previous study, the men selected for this study were all married to Christian or formerly Christian women.

Jewish holidays and rituals

When discussing the observance of Jewish holidays and rituals, most of my informants did not explicitly talk about creative approaches to the holidays. They often considered their ways of celebrating Jewish holidays as traditional, following what they remembered

them from their childhood. In terms of mixing traditions, many of them brought up the example of celebrating Christmas in the family, which is not surprising as it is one of the most visible and widely celebrated holidays in Finland – even if many families do not necessarily attach any religious meaning to it. Yudel said his family has ‘no Christmas-related things’ in their home and instead talked about ‘mixing things’, such as ‘transforming the Christmas calendar into a Hannukah calendar’ and deliberately looking for one that ‘did not have images related to Christmas’ on it. Despite the familial and communal rejection, Anshel remained a member of the community throughout his life. In his first marriage, he and his wife ‘didn’t strike any deal; things just went how they went’. They did not celebrate any Christian holidays in their home and kept the Jewish ones, but owing to the tension between Anshel and the congregation, they never visited the synagogue, but rather celebrated in their home, though, he reckoned, ‘not appropriately’. His second wife converted to Judaism before their children were born. This brought many changes into his life, including becoming more involved in his community. He referred to the second marriage as a ‘different story’, where they celebrated only Jewish holidays. When talking about changes that immigration might bring to his community, Anshel described himself as ‘not religious at all’ but still maintained that ‘traditions and old things are important’ to him. He referred to the preservation of the Askhenazi Orthodox way of performing certain traditions, the way they were done in his childhood.

After his first endogamous marriage, which was not ‘blessed after all’, Iztik remarried, this time to a Christian woman. He had been brought up in an observant household, where his grandfather often told him that ‘no matter what he does’ he

would always remain Jewish. He does not consider himself observant and only visits the synagogue ‘occasionally’ and lights Shabbat candles ‘when he remembers to’. His current wife is ‘very much on board’ when it comes to Jewish traditions. There were only two informants who explicitly mentioned celebrating both Jewish and Christian holidays in their own home – by which they mainly meant Christmas. Issur talked about having a Christmas tree, eating Christmas food and giving presents in a ‘neutral way’ as he describes himself as ‘not religious in any way’ and ‘knows that there are a lot of things connected to that [celebrating religious holidays], and those traditions can be kept even without believing in anything’. He never had any issues with Christmas and did not want to ‘forbid it’. Liebel, who was born in Israel, related that there ‘you don’t need to think about Judaism’ because it is ‘part of life’. His wife did not convert to Judaism and the couple celebrated both the Jewish and some Christian holidays even before relocating to Finland – which in the case of Christmas, mainly meant shopping for presents. He said they continue to ‘take the good things from here and there’. When moving to Finland, however, he started to feel the responsibility to maintain Jewish traditions, since there was no extended Jewish family around anymore. Often it is his wife who lights the candles for Shabbat, because ‘she enjoys that’. She enables Liebel to create a Jewish home and takes some tasks on herself. Liebel was the only informant who reflected on celebrating holidays in unconventional ways during the interview, and jokingly said that one of the reasons that he invited his children over as opposed to going somewhere for the holidays is because then ‘he can do what he wants’ and be more creative with their traditions. This includes him reading Hebrew texts and poetry that are not usually read, for example

during a traditional Pesach *seder*.¹⁸ He often asks his children to do the same and bring writings that they consider suitable for reflection on certain holidays.

The awakening of Jewish identity, described by McGinity (2014) as a consequence of Jewish men entering into mixed marriages, was very much present in the life of the informants, although it was often stimulated by other impulses than marriage. Dovid was one of several informants who stated that their observance at home became stricter when their wives converted to Judaism. His wife essentially enrolled on the conversion course to 'become familiar with the [Jewish] religion through that'. She took part in the courses for five or six years before her conversion took place. Dovid related that he, as opposed to his wife, 'cheats sometimes' when it comes to using electricity on Shabbat. As for the High Holidays or Pesach, usually the whole extended family comes together to celebrate them in a 'traditional way'. Perhaps a similar situation arose in Aizik's life, where, he related, his wife is 'more Jewish than he is' as she pays more attention to keeping the *mitzvot*¹⁹ and the holidays, and 'to this very day, goes to the community more often than I do'. These phenomena are perhaps also connected to the gendered patterns in Jewish households and to women often supporting the view that religion and ethnic traditions are passed down in the families through religious and familial experience – as Jennifer Thompson suggests in her own work on Jewish intermarried couples (Thompson 2013: 98).

Changes in men's practices did not always occur as a result of the conversion

of the spouses, however. Herschel said that he had become stricter directly before the *bonei mitzvot* of his children. He thought it would be 'hypocritical' not to be observant at all, but later, when the children's hobbies started to take up Friday evenings, 'that too dwindled away'. Nevertheless, the family tried to observe the High Holidays and 'if possible' Pesach. Froim and his family always celebrated Jewish holidays together 'in a very traditional way'. His wife has not converted to Judaism and they 'haven't even discussed it' as it was not necessary: he described the process of childhood conversions as a result of the 'growing number of intermarriages', which also meant that the 'number of non-Jewish mothers grew'. They have never celebrated other than Jewish holidays, but often go to his wife's parents to celebrate Christmas and usually celebrate the bigger Jewish holidays with the extended family.

Zisse, who described himself as a 'godless Jew', spoke about Rabbi Mordechai Lanxner, who was active in the congregation in the 1970s. He had asked Zisse if his wife would like to convert to Judaism, but Zisse had told him that she must decide for herself whether she wanted to make that decision or not; he did not want to pressure or ask her. His wife did not want to convert because she thought that 'God is the same for Jews and Christians'. Nevertheless, she agreed to establish a Jewish household and celebrated Jewish holidays in their home. Beynish and his wife never celebrated any other traditions in their home than the Jewish ones. Among all my informants, Beynish was the only one who talked about cleaning the house over Pesach, selling their 'everyday' kitchen equipment, and having a separate set of holiday equipment. He emphasised taking leave from work over Yom Kippur and doing the full fast but mentioned that they use public transport over holidays and electricity during Shabbat. He

18 *Seder*: a ritual feast for the first night or first two nights of Passover.

19 *Mitzvot*: commandments.

also reflected on being perceived as a ‘religious fanatic’ in his community, which implies that the congregants in general are less observant than he and his wife.

Kashrut

The majority of my informants appeared to be flexible with kosher dietary restrictions. Non-Orthodox Jews have developed a variety of ‘kosher-style’ strategies over the twentieth century, which often differ from traditional *kashrut*, and some engage in what is often called *selective treif* (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 123). One variation of this is not consuming seafood or pork, but consuming kosher animals that were not slaughtered with appropriate *shechita*²⁰ – and thus, halakhically they are not kosher either. Most of the men highlighted their approach to *selective treif* by establishing ‘not eating pork’ as their limit. Anshel said that in his first marriage they did consume pork, but this changed during his second marriage; when their children were born, they ‘stopped eating pork completely’. He was the only one who explicitly said that he sees no difference between ‘eating non-kosher turkey sausages or beef’ and eating pork. Today, he said, whenever he eats pork, he ‘doesn’t have any bad feelings about it’. Liebel said that he and his wife do not purchase kosher meat, but the restrictions in their home are ‘kosher enough for them’. Later, when talking about different approaches to Jewishness, Judaism and the complexities around its perceptions and traditions, he told a joke which was meant to illustrate what he finds problematic:

What is kosher? People can go deeper, deeper and deeper, there’s never a bottom to that kind of a thing. Never! [During]

20 *Shechita*: kosher slaughter.

Rosh Hashana, we should eat honey. And the Orthodox who are afraid that the honey is not kosher enough go to the forest and suck it from the bee itself. We can go all the way there.

Liebel felt comfortable about their choice of life and observance and acknowledged that there is always a stricter level. Like other men, Issur emphasised many times that he has never observed any strictly religious traditions, but traditional dishes were always important to him – at least to the extent that he makes them during the greater holidays. Whether he finds it important to use only kosher ingredients when preparing them was left unstated. Herschel said that even though they always had traditional meals at home, ‘they did not have kosher’ and they could ‘for example have shrimps at home’. Like other aspects of observance, the dietary customs also changed somewhat in their home when their children were preparing for their coming of age ceremonies to what he referred to as ‘Scandinavian kosher, which is obviously not kosher within any rabbinical frame’. In Herschel’s family, this approach entails, for example, not eating pork and often buying meat from *halal* stores, but not paying attention to whether ready-made products (e.g. patés) include pork fat – though in this particular case, it is not a unique approach that is a result of an intermarriage, but rather a common approach Finnish Jews tend to choose, as Dóra Pataricza (2019) also concludes in her recent contribution on Finnish Jewish foodways. Aizik, Mendel and Dovid all said that their wives’ conversions brought changes into their household in terms of *kashrut* as well. They established a kosher household and became stricter in their observance. It appears that Aizik’s and Dovid’s wives put more emphasis on keeping a stricter level of kosher than their husbands

– which is a common phenomenon among converts, as already suggested in this article and in earlier research (e.g. Fishman 2006). Some men mentioned their wives’ learning to cook certain dishes from their families’ traditional recipes, and the dishes they ate were regarded as traditional, even though the ingredients were often not strictly kosher. This also implies that the domestic labour and routine household chores often fall on the shoulders of women in the present households. Like intermarried women in the same congregations, many of the men found it important to cook traditional Jewish dishes even if the ingredients were non-kosher. From a vernacular religious perspective, this can be interpreted as a way of performing Jewish identity (Brumberg-Kraus 2018; Mehta 2008: 121).

The Jewish education of offspring

In general, the institutions providing formal Jewish education in Finland have been formally connected to the Finnish Jewish communities. The Jewish Community of Helsinki runs both a kindergarten and a school, but also offers other youth activities to the congregants and their families. In addition, Chabad Lubavitch runs a Jewish daycare centre, although these have been present in the country only since 2003. The Jewish Community of Turku, for its part, has even more limited means of providing education in view of the very small size of the congregation. During the second half of the twentieth century a *cheder*²¹ and a ‘Sunday school’ were operating in Turku, but because of the lack of young congregants, they ended their activities. The already limited pool of

21 *Cheder*: a school of elementary Jewish education, where children become familiar with the ‘basics of Judaism’.

potential students was further narrowed as the Jewish Community of Helsinki established a policy of compulsory circumcision of male children seeking enrolment in either the Jewish kindergarten or the Jewish school.

Zisse’s children did not attend the Jewish school, as it was not possible to do so for uncircumcised male children at the time. On the other hand, his wife ‘did not have anything against’ providing a Jewish upbringing to their children. Now, both his children are adults and identify as Jewish, but only one of them went through the official conversion process himself. Zisse considers this son to be ‘the most Jewish’ of them all in the sense of having the best knowledge about Jewish traditions and observance. Ansel’s disagreement with his family concerning his intermarriage has come to define his and some of his children’s relationships to Judaism. His children from the first marriage automatically became members of the Jewish Community (in accordance with the FRA of 1922), but nevertheless chose to stay ‘distant’ from Judaism, only keeping certain connections with the congregation, mainly through its organisations, such as Makkabi, the Jewish sports association. Ansel’s children from his second marriage received Jewish education and attended the Jewish school when growing up. During our discussion, Ansel referred to them as ‘formally Jewish at least in Helsinki, but certainly not in Israel’. Still, they are active in their own community and – as their father proudly pointed out – are members of Chevra Kadisha, the Jewish burial society, which is ‘the biggest *mitzvah*’.²² Beynish and his wife raised their child Jewish and enrolled him at the Jewish school. They also told him early on that his mother’s conversion – and thus his own status – may not be accepted

22 *Mitzvah*: good deed.

by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. Dovid also found it important to agree with his wife about providing a Jewish upbringing for their children. Despite him not being as strict as his wife on the issue of conversion, he wanted Judaism to be visible in his family's daily life and not only in 'tales about grandma'.

Yudel's wife has not converted to Judaism, but before their children were born, she agreed to raise the children as Jews, which entailed a childhood conversion and enrolling them in the Jewish institutions as well as giving them Jewish names. Mendel expressed his desire to bring up his children as Jews, which his wife agreed to. From the start, she was very interested in Judaism and wanted to learn about it. Thus, she attended the conversion course in her husband's community, which resulted in her conversion to Judaism. Herschel said his wife knew about the 'rich cultural heritage' of his ancestors and he told her that he 'wished to have a Jewish home of some sort' and the importance of matrilineal descent in this context. Still, he did not pressure her to convert to Judaism. Eventually, she did convert, however. Velvel and Issur, for their part, did not say much about their families and the negotiations they had gone through in setting up their own religious practices. Velvel said, however, that both of his children went through the conversion process with Rabbi Lanxner, although his wife opted out of it. Despite not converting, she was very involved in Jewish life, however; this was a conscious decision in the family. He also spoke about the rejection his child experienced before marrying a Jewish man: the rabbi they invited to officiate at the ceremony did not agree to perform it, as 'he did not accept Rabbi Lanxner's conversion'. Issur seemed to have agreed to bring up their children in both traditions, celebrating both Christian and Jewish holidays in a non-religious, 'cultural' sense. As

for Liebel and his family, he states that his wife 'tries to keep up the Jewishness and the Israeliness' in their life even more than he does himself. His children feel very Jewish; Liebel did not mention whether they had a conversion or not. Even though they are already grown-ups, they often celebrate the holidays together with their parents. Aizik was the only man who talked about the double minority status of his wife, who converted to Judaism herself. As a Swedish-speaking Finn, Swedish has a special importance in her life, yet she was willing to enrol their children at the Finnish-speaking Jewish educational institutions, even though it was 'exceptionally hard' for her. Yet, perhaps partially because of her conversion, Jewish education may have also held a special importance for her.

Most of the men estimated that their children have some sort of Jewish identity, many of them being connected with a Jewish community or some of the local Jewish organisations. Itzik's children from his first marriage withdrew from the community, and it was not clear whether Anshel's children are still registered in the membership books since the change in the Freedom of Religion Act. The contextual attributes (Romashko 2020; Kupari and Vuola 2020; Primiano 1995) definitely played a great role in the decisions these men took when deciding about the Jewish upbringing of their children. The responsibility to raise children also contributed to the awakening of a Jewish identity among the informants (McGinity 2014). These decisions, however, could not have been made or implemented without sufficient support from their spouses, regardless of their own choices to convert or not convert to Judaism themselves.

Conclusions

Owing to the contradictory legal situation that prevailed in Finland between 1922 and 1970, defining the religious affiliation of children according to the father rather than to the mother as Jewish law defines it, local Jewish communities were forced to establish a protocol to deal with the matter. This protocol facilitated the conversions of halakhically non-Jewish children, and the inclusion of Jewish men who married out, within the communities. The protocol that was developed in the Jewish Community of Helsinki in the 1950s established a structure in the Jewish communities that allowed these men to ensure their and their children's involvement in the congregations. This arrangement implies that the congregational debates on Jewish identity in Finland have shifted over the twentieth century; comparable are the shifts that have taken place in the United States as a result of the introduction of the Reform movement (Mehta 2018). The approaches of the men presented in this study, as well as the changes that have taken place within the local congregations, exemplify how vernacular religion can operate and take form within the framework of institutional religion, initiating processes that include absorbing, learning, accepting and changing the religious parameters of personal lives, families and even community praxis (Primiano 2001, 2012).

Instead of supporting the ideal of families where the religious traditions of both parents are present, the informants expressed their desire to raise their children Jewish. Occasionally, however, they agreed on mixing traditions and incorporating aspects of their spouse's Christian backgrounds into their family life. Even though all of the men were members of Orthodox Jewish communities, only one of them mentioned

having experienced harsh rejection by both his family and his community as a result of marrying out. The vast majority of the men presented in this article had a strong desire to raise their children Jewish, and often this was more important to them than the conversion of their partners. Despite this, many women decided to 'take on the yoke of the Torah' and convert to Judaism – most often before their children were born. In line with McGinity's suggestion based on her own study, these men's ties to their cultural heritage increased their ability to raise their children effectively as Jewish (McGinity 2014). Yet, this would definitely not have been possible without the protocolary frame established by the Finnish Jewish congregations, or without the support they received from their wives, whether converted or not. This aspect is in line with Jennifer Thompson's findings, who suggests that her informants 'might not have been motivated, or able to create or foster their children's emotional attachments to Judaism' without their wives taking on the tasks (Thompson 2013: 166), but it also points to how the division of labour in the families under study is still polarised by aspects of the gender-traditional realm of Judaism.

Jews who were born Jewish may feel attached to their ancestry as an assurance of their Jewishness, but may not necessarily feel the need to engage in any specific ritual observance (Tenenbaum and Davidman 2007: 443). The results of current research suggest that the informants interviewed for this study approach ritual observance similarly. They hardly identify themselves as Orthodox, yet they are members of Orthodox Jewish congregations – which is perhaps partially due to the lack of available options in Finland. The men and their spouses in the current study had created a narrative and found ways to create a cohesive family with traditions that accommodate the

needs of both spouses – sometimes despite the attitudes of their extended families. In several cases, such as in Aizik's or Dovid's, converted Jewish wives paid considerably more attention to religious observance. Liebel even highlighted that despite not having converted, his wife is often viewed as 'more Jewish than him' in their family. As opposed to my findings on intermarried women in the Finnish Jewish communities (Czimbalmos 2020a), intermarried men appear to be less creative with their domestic practices in their homes. This is partially due to the 'gender-traditional division' of domestic labour, the gendered patterns of the household and perhaps the traditional gender roles within their families. Whether these men prefer this division of labour or not, they do not seem to be against it. As earlier research indicates, the 'lack of creativity' may also be explained by men's greater opportunities to be involved in the religious practices of an Orthodox Jewish community. The intermarried women in the local communities have a lesser role in the liturgical practices, since their congregations operate along the lines of non-egalitarian Orthodox traditions. Thus, they may be more open to expressing creativity in their own practices in the home, in order to preserve their connections to their Jewish traditions. One exception among the men in this study was Liebel, who specifically emphasised that he enjoys integrating aspects of modern poetry and contemporary texts, for example into their Pesach *seder*, and did in fact approach Jewish traditions in a creative way.

As for the question of faith or belief, except for Iztik, none of the men talked about religious belief of any sort. The picture is not that simple or black and white, however. For example, Beynish emphasised the importance of spirituality to a certain extent in our discussions. Some of them, such as Velvel and

Issur, explicitly said that they are not religious but 'cultural Jews'. Zisse, who talked about himself as a 'godless Jew', was the only person who openly articulated estrangement in relation to the practice of *brit milah*; he had decided not to get his sons circumcised, allowing them to decide for themselves at an older age. My other informants did not see, or chose not to address, any problems in circumcising their children. It can very well be assumed, however, that their decisions were influenced by the institutional requirements of the local congregations, where circumcision is or was often considered to be a 'self-evident' marker of Jewish identity. The system that was established in the congregation in the 1950s, and which has remained in practice ever since, can be regarded as a concrete embodiment of the close interconnections between individual interpretations and contextual attributes that the framework of vernacular religion was designed to highlight (Romashko 2020; Kupari and Vuola 2020; Primiano 1995). Perhaps, if the historical and social conditions had been different, the congregational policies, and consequently the communal and individual practices connected with them, would have evolved differently in the context under study. It is important to point out, however, that intermarried men – like their female counterparts studied in my other article on the subject (Czimbalmos 2020a) – 'married out but remained in'. They are still Jewish and getting involved in intermarriages, and becoming fathers, strengthened their Jewish identity or simply facilitated its awakening.

In the present case, the gendered identity of the informants can be illuminated and understood as a result of the combination of the gender-traditional Orthodox Jewish context, the Finnish policies of the twentieth century and the personal experiences, reflections and circumstances of the individuals interviewed

for the study. In this intersection of influences and incentives, the male members of the local communities are enabled to develop ways of raising Jewish children in religiously mixed families – making them *Yidische tates* in their own right. ■

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