Resisting Assimilation

Ethnic Boundary Maintenance Among Jews in Sweden

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Abstract

This paper applies the ethnic boundary making theory developed by Andreas Wimmer to understand the maintenance of Jewish ethnic identification in Sweden, as expressed in thirteen interviews with Swedish Jews. Wimmer’s theory holds that ethnic conflict and persecution routinizes and entrenches perceptions of ethnic difference; I argue that the antisemitic persecutions of the 20th century has entrenched the perception of the ethnic distinctiveness of Jews among Jews themselves. These persecutions also contribute to alienation from Swedish society, which does not share the same historical identity and frames of understanding. These factors in turn motivate the participants to maintain the ethnic boundary between Swedes and Jews and guard it against assimilation. Ethnic consciousness also motivates Jews to endow the category of “Jewish” with cultural content, sometimes having previously lacked knowledge of Jewish culture; the cultural distinctiveness of Jews is thus shown to partly be a result of the ethnic boundary between Jews and others, and not just an explanation for that boundary. However; the participants are generally not prepared to restrict the choice of romantic bonds to fellow Jews; since social closure is required to maintain ethnic boundaries (as stressed by Wimmer), this puts the participants in a contradictory situation.

Key words

Ethnic boundaries; ethnic identity; Andreas Wimmer; Jews; Swedish Jews; antisemitism; Holocaust.
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Introduction

The academic debate on ethnicity over the last few decades has largely focused on the opposition between essentialism and constructivism, the latter emerging as the clear winner. But much of the constructivist literature has gone too far in the direction of what Andreas Wimmer (2013:3) calls “hyperconstructivism”; it has emphasised that ethnicity is malleable, situationally defined, and constructed on the micro level in day-to-day life; but it has often failed to place such social construction in an historical context and explain why we see such large variation in how much, and how, ethnicity matters for individuals and societies. Whereas much of earlier work takes the relationship between ethnic identity and ethnic culture for granted, and much constructivist work inspired by postmodernism, on the other extreme, overstates the malleability and situatedness of ethnic identity, Wimmer offers a comparative analytic of ethnic boundary making that attempts to understand why ethnicity is sometimes fickle and changeable; but sometimes stable and taken for granted. Going beyond common approaches to the construction of ethnic identity through micro level discourse, this approach allows a deeper understanding of the relationship between culture, ethnic self-understanding, and the historical background of ethnic conflict and persecution.

As regards the interplay between persecution, nationality, cultural survival and ethnic identity, Jews in Sweden make up an interesting and understudied case. Jews are in general socially, culturally and economically well integrated, and are in many cases not a visual minority, meaning that for many Jews it would be possible to assimilate into general society. Yet many Jews hold on to their Jewish identities and view it as an important part of who they are, feeling an affinity with the Jewish people globally. The subject of how European Jews view their ethnicity has however not been given extensive attention by social scientists in the constructivist tradition. The few interview studies that have been carried out, moreover, are not up to date; they predate some prominent changes in Europe’s ethnic dynamics, including significant waves of immigration, the continued development of discourses of multiculturalism, and a resurgence of far-right movements. Since previous studies of European Jewish identities (Rapaport 1997), more time has elapsed since the events of the Holocaust, and Sweden is experiencing shifts in the renegotiation of its ethnic order, to which
Jews have to decide how to relate. The purpose of this study then, is to ask; how can we understand the maintenance of Jewish ethnicity in Sweden by applying the boundary making perspective?

Theoretical perspectives

Ethnic boundary making

In the constructivist literature on ethnicity, the concept of *boundary making strategies* has often been employed to talk about the processes through which ethnic groups are cognitively and socially delineated. Andreas Wimmer (2013), drawing on Fredrik Barth (1969), argues that to understand ethnicity and ethnic identity, we must focus on the boundaries which these phenomena imply:

*Each identification (“I am Swiss”) obviously implies a categorical boundary (the non-Swiss); each corresponding action (e.g. helping another Swiss to find an apartment in Los Angeles) implies discriminating against those on the other side of the divide (i.e. not helping someone from Sweden). Focusing on social and categorical boundaries allows us to study the formation and dissolution of ethnic groups with more precision than standard sociological approaches that take the existence and continuity of such groups and categories for granted (Wimmer 2013:3).*

Ethnic boundaries contain both cognitive, or “categorical” aspects, and “social or behavioral” aspects; “The former refers to acts of social classification and collective representation, the latter to everyday networks of relationships that result from individual acts of connecting and distancing” (Wimmer 2013: 9). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1985; 2010), Wimmer also argues for a focus on “how actors struggle over which social boundaries should be considered relevant and what the consequences of being an X versus being a Y should entail” (2013:4). Boundary making, then, consists first of different ways of making categorical distinctions between people – Wimmer calls these *modes* of boundary making – and secondly of ways of making one’s “vision of the legitimate divisions of society relevant” (Wimmer 2013:63), that is, ways to impose the categorical distinctions one draws in one’s mind on the rest of society, to attempt to change, or preserve, society so that it will be structured in accordance with the
ethnic divisions one considers legitimate and important – Wimmer calls these *means* of boundary work. Wimmer also presents a taxonomy, purporting to be exhaustive, of all the modes and means of boundary making. Let us first considered the *modes* of boundary making:

1. *Expansion* is an “attempt to shift an existing boundary to a more inclusive (...) level” (Wimmer 2013: 50). Here, emphasis is shifted from smaller groups to a larger one; for example, when national unity is advocated over regional loyalties.

2. *Contraction* is the antonym of expansion, an attempt to shift to a more exclusive set of boundaries.

3. *Transvaluation* is the attempt to change the hierarchical ordering of ethnic groups, a reinterpretation of the relationship between oppressed group and oppressor; members of oppressed groups often “reinterpreted historical defeat and subjugation into a heroic struggle against injustice and domination” (Wimmer 2013:58).

4. *Positional moves* are attempts to change positions in an ethnic order, but leaving that order itself intact. An example is when individual Jews, in contexts where Jews are defined as an ethnic minority, abandon their Jewishness and assimilate into the ethnic majority.

5. *Blurring* means that ethnic boundaries are de-emphasized altogether, for example by emphasizing local bonds among ethnically diverse people, or, on the other end of the scale, universal, common humanity.

Now we turn to the *means* of boundary making. When successful, these means of boundary making will produce a social world structured according to one’s preferred categorical distinctions, and, we should emphasise, a world in which these distinctions are shared by all actors and considered “natural” and reflecting the inner “essence” of the persons they sort. They are sorted from least to most effective; (1) discourse and symbols; (2) discrimination; (3) political mobilization; (4) coercion and violence. Needless to say, it must be extremely rare that Jews in Sweden use violence to enforce the boundary between themselves and majority Swedes, so we can trust that the first three levels, discourse, discrimination (in a loose sense) and political mobilization will be most relevant for our discussion in this paper. However, it is important to remember that violence is an extremely effective way to establish an ethnic boundary and make it appear natural and important, since I will argue that this has been an effect of the Holocaust and other instances of anti-Jewish violence. It is also important to note that the access to these different means is structured by power differences.
Ethnicity and culture

The relationship between ethnicity and culture has been at the heart of the ethnicity debate. The traditional anthropological view, and arguably a widespread “common sense” view, is that the world consists in a patchwork of reasonably clearly defined “cultures”, internally more or less homogenous, coinciding with ethnic borders (Wimmer 2002: chapter 2). This paradigm was supplanted by a constructivist one, that turned against reifying and essentialist depictions of “cultures” as bounded wholes. This paradigmatic shift, most often seen as initiated by Barth (1969; see also Moerman 1965), meant, as Wimmer aptly describes it, that

Researchers would no longer study ‘the culture’ of ethnic group A or B, but rather how the ethnic boundary between A and B was inscribed onto a landscape of continuous cultural transitions. Ethnicity was no longer synonymous with objectively defined cultures, but rather referred to the subjective ways in which actors marked group boundaries by pointing to specific diacritics that distinguished them from ethnic others (2013:22-23).

Cultural criteria, the new constructivist consensus asserted, are neither necessary nor sufficient for an ethnic boundary, nor is the sharpness of an ethnic boundary necessarily indicative of large cultural differences (Eriksen 2010: chapter 3 reviews this debate); we shall see later that Lynn Rapaport (1997) argues that Jews in Germany are not particularly different, culturally, from non-Jewish Germans, but that there is still a highly consequential cognitive and social boundary between the two groups.

Wimmer (2002; 2013) also suggests a plausible dialectic relationship between processes of social closure and cultural markers. Wimmer argues that cultural disparity, along with inequality, conflict, and social closure, will tend to increase the stability and taken-for-grantedness of an ethnic boundary; but he also suggests that the “borderlines between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are often marked by distinctive forms of everyday cultural practices” (2002:33).

Wimmer does not much develop this point, but it implies that if there already exists a categorical distinction and social closure against those defined as being outside one’s ingroup, cultural attributes associated with one’s group may be emphasized in order to help define that group’s identity. In such cases, the ethnic boundary can hardly be explained by cultural differences; instead, the cultural differences grow exactly as a result of the ethnic boundary, and the need to provide identity to an already delimited social entity (Barth 1969; Eriksen 2010: 45-46). Complicating matters further, cultural differences then, in turn,
Contribute to ethnic boundaries becoming routinized and taken for granted, in a powerful feedback process. This view, then, does not assume that cultural differences precede and account for ethnic distinctions; nor does it discount the importance in culture for structuring ethnic differences; rather, it describes a dialectic between ethnic boundaries and cultural difference (cf. Cornell 1996).

**The nationalist principle and ethnic exclusion**

Nationality and ethnicity are, of course, tightly intertwined concepts. The core of the nationalist idea is the idea that political authority may only legitimately be exercised by “like over like” – by those belonging to the same “people” as their citizens. As Wimmer (2002) shows, this notion is closely bound up with political modernity in the form of the nation state and democracy. Whereas the old empires had been run on the basis of an explicit hierarchy, without pretentions of equal rights or popular autonomy, “the people” were now supposed to be sovereign. The forming of nation states thus necessitated a clear definition of “the people”, which was promised equality and security in return for their loyalty to the state. While national and ethnic attachment has sometimes been regarded as remnants of pre-modern collectivism, contrasted to modern egalitarian individualism, Wimmer thus forcefully argues that ethnic and national principles are integral to political modernity and the modern state. We are living in a nationalist age in which the nationalist idea, that the state should be ruled in the name of a nationally defined people, legitimates state power.

Political modernity thus replaced imperial hierarchy and autarchy with popular inclusion – but only for those included in the national entity. In the old regimes, the divide had been between commoners – who were all equally excluded from positions of influence – and elites. The new vertical inclusion was accompanied by horizontal exclusion. Those residents of a state who happened to be left out of the “nation” in whose name the state was now supposed to rule now became “ethnic minorities”. In many cases, these marginalized peoples formed counter-nationalisms that mirrored the rhetoric of the national compromise that they had now been left out of. The exclusion of those considered non-nationals and ethno-national mobilization on the part of excluded minorities are for Wimmer, then, two sides of the same coin. The notion that “like should rule over like” has gained almost universal acceptance and is used also by excluded minorities to argue for their autonomy. Excluded minorities have to either successfully argue that they are to be included in the conception of the nation, or argue that
they are to be seen as a nation in their own right, and attempt to gain national autonomy elsewhere. In Wimmer’s theory of ethnic boundary making (2013) the nation state thus has the role of incentivizing ethnic identification over other modes of identification that blur ethnical and national boundaries altogether, such as local or class based identification.

**Boundary making as strategic action**

From the above it should be clear that Wimmer views ethnic boundary making as *strategic*. There has been much debate about whether it makes sense to view ethnic self-identification as strategic, rather than taken for granted and expressed in “good faith”. Barth’s (1969) original statement went far in the direction of rationalist instrumentalism, viewing ethnic classifications as strategies undertaken by rational actors with clear goals in mind. This aspect of the boundary making paradigm has rightly been criticised (for example by Gil-White 1997; cf. Eriksen 2010: 63-69). Lamont (2014:816-817), in an otherwise mostly laudatory comment on Wimmer’s (2013) book, argues that Wimmer’s strategic approach is misguided since individuals “are rarely conscious that they inhabit categorization systems. Instead, they tend to use schemas that are largely taken for granted and made available by the national cultural repertoires that surround them”. Wimmer’s position, however, is not at all as reductively rationalist as Barth’s, and manages, in my opinion, to locate a reasonable middle-road between rational choice instrumentalism and primordialism. Rather than establishing *a priori* either that ethnic identification is open for choice or is always set in stone from birth, Wimmer incorporates the continuum between these two extremes in his theoretical model. As Wimmer (2014: 840) himself writes in a reply to Lamont;

> I think this is (...) a matter of empirical circumstances that need to be carefully specified, rather than a matter of theoretical principle to be posited ex cathedra. If ethnic boundaries are associated with high degrees of social closure, cultural differentiation, and widely agreed upon, chapter 4 [of Wimmer (2013)] argues, they indeed become taken for granted, routinized and ‘constitutive of reality’, à la Luckman and Berger. In other contexts, however, they represent classificatory elements to which individuals maintain considerable reflective distance and that are therefore not preconfiguring their everyday experience.

As micro-interactional research in the tradition of Goffmann [sic] shows, however, even when an ethnic or racial boundary has solidified into a taken-for-granted schema, as is perhaps the case with the black/white divide in the USA, individuals
negotiate strategically what it exactly means, in each micro-minutiae of an encounter, to be black or white and what the proper associations and role behaviours should be (Lyman and Douglass 1973). The book argues that it is theoretically fruitful to see individuals even in these situations as strategically competent actors who aim to enhance their own moral recognition, prestige, power and command over resources...

It should also be emphasized at this point that the goals sought in strategies of boundary work need not be exogenously given, that is, independent of previous boundary struggles. Once we come to identify with a certain group, we may, of course, be willing to “incur high costs to defend the culture and honour of [our] community” (Wimmer 2013: 104) in order to live up to our sense of duty (cf. Gil-White 1997:805-807). Far from being a “rational choice” theory, then, Wimmer’s conception of strategic action is much closer to Bourdieu’s account of strategies for “symbolic profit” (e.g. Bourdieu 2010), suggesting a feedback process between the classificatory struggles forming the categories through which we understand ourselves and the rewards sought through such struggles. For Bourdieu “a profit in legitimacy… which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be” is the “profit par excellence” (2010:225) and “the properly social magic of institutions can constitute almost anything as an interest” (Bourdieu quoted in Wacquant 1989:42).

**Summary**

We can now sum up those of Wimmer’s theoretical ideas that are relevant for this paper;

- Attempts to advance a particular vision of division of society into different ethnic groups can be understood as strategies of boundary making.
- Expansion, contraction, transvaluation, positional moves, and blurring are different ways to attempt to modify existing boundaries. This can be done through discourse, discrimination, political mobilization, and violence.
- The more ethnic boundaries are accompanied by conflict, inequality, social closure, and cultural differences, the more they appear to ethnic actors to be natural and reflective of inner essence.
- Cultural differences along ethnic lines, however, are not only a *cause* of ethnic boundaries and their seeming naturality, but are themselves also *caused* by such boundaries, when cultural attributes are used to signify ethnic belonging.
Historical background

In this section,1 I will provide an overview of the history of the Jews in Sweden, with particular focus on the relationship between Jewishness and Swedishness, and how we can understand this through Wimmer’s (2013) boundary making framework. Jewish immigration to Sweden started in the 1770s – although it was highly restricted and only well-to-do Jews were allowed to settle, in the hope that they would boost the economy. Jews were granted full citizenship in 1870 after which a considerable number of Russian and Eastern European Jews came to Sweden fleeing poverty and pogroms. There was a considerable gulf between the newly arrived poor Eastern European Jews and the well-established and integrated Jews from Germany. Within the latter group, there was a strong tendency towards assimilation which was sometimes feared to be imperilled by the arrival of new foreign, “strange” Jews. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the strategy had been to reduce Jewishness to the religious sphere, with the goal to present the Jews as “Swedes of Mosaic beliefs”.2 The boundary between Jew and non-Jew was construed as a matter of “beliefs”, not “nationality”, to avoid being seen as “foreigners”. This tendency was especially prevalent among Jews who were successful in Swedish society. It should be noted that ironically, many of those integrated Jews who argued for viewing Judaism as only a matter of religion were not necessarily for that reason either particularly pious or knowledgeable about Judaism – the point was to deny that Jews constituted their own national or ethnic group.3

The Eastern Jews, on the other hand, in general shared neither these assimilationist intentions nor the idea that being Jewish was primarily a matter of religion. It was in this group that Zionism first manifested itself in Sweden, advocating that Jews should be seen as a nationality in their own right. But if Jewishness was a matter of nationality, this seemed to imply that Jews were not fully Swedish. For this reason, many leading Jews, including the leadership of Stockholm’s Mosaic Congregation, fiercely opposed Zionism, fearing it would roll back the

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1 This historical description draws on Valentin (1964), Sjögren (2001) and Bredefeldt (2008).
2 In Stockholm, the name “Mosaic congregation” was kept until 1978, when “Jewish congregation” was finally adopted. “Mosaic congregation” is still used by Norwegian and Danish congregations. In Germany, also, the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith was founded in 1892 with similar intentions (Bieber 1979:49).
3 See also Scholem’s (1979) discussion of German Jewry in the first decades of the 20th century, which mirrored Swedish Jewry in this regard.
progress made in integration. It was not until the 1930’s, concurrent with the Nazi rise to power, that the Congregation and many assimilated, “western” Jews in Sweden started to slowly warm up to Zionism (Sjögren 2001:52-65).4

All of this seems to conform well to the predictions of Wimmer’s theoretical model, which predicts that inequality in resources – including that of political power – as well as cultural differences along an ethnic boundary will make that boundary seem natural and immutable, whereas equality between groups will allow people to feel some distance towards that boundary. The established Swedish Jews had possessed the economic and cultural capital necessary to achieve acculturation and integration in Sweden, and had every reason to downplay the differences between themselves and Swedes (though antisemitism certainly existed in Sweden at this time). Those now arriving from Eastern Europe, however, came from a milieu in which Jews lived separately from and spoke a different language than the majority population, and suffered ethnic violence which further entrenched the ethnic divide. As Wimmer’s model would predict, coming from such a background, the essential distinctness of the Jewish people seemed obvious and natural. Moreover, they had a clear incentive to advocate for emphasis on the Jewish group, through Zionism, a case of counter-nationalism; having little reason to believe that Jews in Europe would ever be free from persecution while remaining a minority in European nations, the establishment of a new, Jewish nation seemed to offer a way out. When assimilated or assimilationist Jews in Sweden and Germany later came to realize that their declarations of national loyalty and patriotism had been entirely unsuccessful in hindering antisemitism, they too came largely to shift their loyalty to the Jewish entity, including the embrace of Zionism. We can see, then, how the “visions of legitimate divisions of society” (Wimmer 2013:44) – in this case, whether to draw boundaries against Swedes, and argue that all Jews belong to a common community, or to deny that Jews make up an ethnic or national group and profess loyalty to Sweden – are chosen based on which construction of community offers the largest emotional and strategic benefits. Those who had hoped to achieve full integration denied that there was an ethnic boundary between Jews and Swedes. When Nazi antisemitism grew, many gave up these hopes and embraced the notion of a Jewish nation or ethnos.

4 Again, see Scholem (1979) for the similar situation in Germany where Zionism also was opposed by assimilationist Jews.
Some 4000 Jews who came to Sweden during World War II stayed after the war. Since then, the biggest wave of Jewish immigration was from Poland, when that country experienced an antisemitic campaign in 1968. The Jewish Central council today estimates that there are 20 000 Jews in Sweden (Judiska Centralrådet, 2017). Stockholm’s Jewish Congregation has 5000 members out of an estimated 9000 Jews in the Stockholm area. In 1999, Sweden introduced the notion of “national minorities”. These are five ethnic minority groups that are deemed to be part of the Swedish national fabric rather than “immigrants” – they are Sami, Roma, Tornedalians, Swedish Finns – and Jews. This commits the Swedish government to the conservation of Jewish culture and the Yiddish language – but it is probably just as significant on the symbolic level, communicating that Jews are an integrated part of Swedish society, while still to be considered a distinct ethnic group, the distinction of which is to be protected.

Previous research

**Applications of Wimmer’s Ethnic Boundary making theory**

This study should be understood in the context of Wimmer’s boundary making theory and the (still young) literature of empirical studies applying it. Since the publication of Wimmer’s first article (2008) describing his boundary making approach, the theory has caused a lively academic debate (eg. Lamont 2014; Jenkins 2014; Brubaker 2014; Winant 2015; cf. Wimmer 2014; 2015). Wimmer himself has applied his framework to a number of varying empirical scenarios (eg. Wimmer 2013, ch. 5-7). Thomas et al. (2016) apply the boundary making framework to show that minority students in Norway are excluded from a Norwegian identity and react to the Norwegian “ideal of sameness” by creating a “third space’ of self-identification” (2016: 226). Here, self-worth is asserted mainly by transvaluating ethnic stigma “into the empowering ‘we immigrants’” (ibid.), or by blurring ethnic boundaries and identifying with the transnational Islamic ummah. Siebers (2017) uses Wimmer’s boundary making approach to analyse ethnic dynamics among Dutch police officers, showing that ethnicity is made salient when particular situations are interpreted through an ethnic script. For example, conflicts in the workplace may be interpreted as resulting from cultural differences when actually, Siebers argues, it is the ethnicized precarity of migrant officers that is responsible for the conflict; the “ethnicising discourse on migrants (...) sparks ethnic
boundary constructions, making use of whatever ‘cultural stuff’ that is available in this discourse to make such boundaries credible” (2017: 616).

**Ethnic boundaries in Sweden**

Ethnic divisions have been significant for most of Swedish history; both those between majority Swedes and the indigenous Sami population, and those resulting from Sweden’s long and varied history as a destination for migrants (see Svanberg & Tydén 2005). Today, discussions of ethnic dynamics are strongly focused on migrants to Sweden and their descendants. Hellgren (2012) argues that the very concept “immigrant” may be seen as boundary making, and that the concept has become racialized (2012:32-33). While different migrant groups have different experiences, then, there is a tendency to a collective categorization of “immigrants”. Ethnicity in Sweden seems often to be understood in a dichotomous scheme of “Swede” and “immigrant” – where the label “immigrant” is applied in particular to those who visibly appear to originate from outside of Europe.

The Swedish labour market has been shown to be highly structured by ethnic inequality, with immigrants from Africa and Asia faring considerably worse than natives as well as immigrants from North/West Europe (Gustafsson & Zheng 2006; Petersson 2014). The disparity seems to be partly caused by discrimination and lack of requisite social and cultural capital (Petersson 2014). From a Wimmerian perspective, it might then be argued that the dichotomous nature of ethnic boundary making discourse in Sweden is strengthened by the convergence of perceived cultural, socio-economic and ethno-somatic (racial) boundaries. It is worth asking how Jews, who are socio-economically well-integrated and are not typically seen as a visual minority, perceive their place in this context. The present study also contributes an analysis on the boundary making practices of members of an ethnic minority group striving to retain its distinctiveness, whereas previous research on ethnic boundary making in Sweden (Hellgren 2012) has focused on how majority Swedes erect boundaries against “immigrants”, and how the latter struggle for inclusion.

Koopmans et al. (2005) argue that institutional and discursive opportunity structures determine possible forms of ethnic mobilization and claims-making. They suggest that conceptions of citizenship may be ethnic, or conversely more civic-territorial, and also more culturally monist or conversely more culturally pluralist. Sweden is often thought of as a bastion of *multiculturalism* – in the framework of Koopmans et al. (2005), this means a civic,
culturally pluralist notion of nationality. Borevi (2013) nuances but ultimately gives support to this perception of the country, showing that while Sweden has rejected multiculturalism formulated negatively, as exceptions from state intervention, it has embraced positively formulated multicultural measures; “minorities’ right to state support” (2013:146). The multicultural discourse, then, resting on the idea that diversity of culture and the maintenance of cultural authenticity for minority groups is positive for a society, is firmly rooted in Sweden and can be expected to have consequences for how ethnic minorities formulate claims to distinctiveness while still wishing to remain an integrated part of Swedish society.

**Jews in contemporary Sweden**

In its application of the boundary making approach and its use of a qualitative method, my research fills a gap in the literature on Swedish Jewry. While one can find a literature of personal reflections about Jewish identity by Jewish non-social-scientists (Jakubowski 1993), there is little sociological work on Sweden’s Jews, and even less that applies a qualitative method. Ilicki (1988) describes the changes in ethnic identity for Jews born between 1935 and 1962 who migrated to Sweden from Poland in the years 1967 to 1972, due to antisemitic campaigns in the latter country. Ilicki sent out a questionnaire to all Polish Jews who came to Sweden during the specified period (1213 people). His main finding is that Jewish consciousness had increased significantly in the studied group since their migration to Sweden, when it came both to cultural orientation and ethnic self-identification. In Poland, many Jews had been heavily “Polonized”, but when antisemitism flared up on in the country many Jews realized that they were not considered Poles by their surrounding society. Ilicki argues that the reference group (Shibutani 1955) of the Polish Jews shifted from Poles to Jews. In Sweden, a majority became much more heavily invested in their Jewish ethnicity, and took up Jewish cultural practices that had been unknown to them before migration.

Two noted survey studies have also been carried out with members of Stockholm’s Jewish congregation; one by Fischer (1996) and one by Dencik (2007). Both studies confirm that Jews in Sweden, as in many other countries today, view their Jewishness as mainly a matter of ethnicity and not religion. Fischer (1996:153) shows, for example, that the primary motive given for membership in the congregation is “Because I feel like a Jew” followed by “Because it strengthens my connection to the Jewish people”, with motivations pertaining to religious duty ranking much lower. From Dencik’s later study we learn that congregation members tend to more often view the Jews in Sweden “primarily as a part of the Jewish
people” (Dencik 2007:35) than as primarily a religious denomination. Jews in Sweden, then – even those that are congregation members – generally have an areligious view of what it means to be Jewish.

**Jewish identities outside of Sweden**

Previous research on Jewish identity in Sweden conforms to what we know from other contexts; Jews in Europe and North America have gone through a great secularization process and today generally tend to view Jewishness as primarily a matter of ethnicity and peoplehood, not religion, with the political dynamics of antisemitism and Zionism playing a large part in defining the meaning of Jewishness in the modern world (e.g. Meyer 1990; Chervyakov et. al 1997)\(^5\). However, as Williams (2007), when reviewing the extant sociological literature on post-Holocaust Jewry, puts it, there has been “limited interface between the social constructionist perspective, the Holocaust, and research on Jewish identity” (Williams 2007: 108) - Rapaport (1997) makes a similar observation. Williams speculates that groups with a collective trauma may be reluctant to generalize discussions of group identity by properly connecting it to the broader constructivist literature, as to avoid sensitive debates about the uniqueness of the trauma, and that this might explain this dearth in the literature (2007: 108). My contribution to this literature, of course, also consists in my application of Wimmer’s theoretical approach to the topic of Jewish identification; while Wimmer’s approach has been praised for its wide applicability which allows comparisons between disparate cases, I have not found any extended application of it to the topic of Jewish identification. Even more generally, however, interview studies in which Jews have given in-depth accounts of their Jewishness are still rare.

One notable exception is Rapaport ‘s (1997) theoretically sophisticated study of Jews in Germany. Rapaport emphasizes that ethnicity is created through people’s ethnicized distinctions and perceptions; “Jewish ethnicity is created and recreated thousands of times daily by the mental distinctions Jews make between themselves and others in the course of everyday life” (1997:26) rather than being easily recognizable through any “simple measures such as language, cultural traits, intermarriage, and the like” (1997:15). She also emphasises the importance of the Holocaust in the construction of Jewishness; after extensive interviews

\(^5\) For an extended, albeit somewhat out of date, overview of research on Jews in Scandinavia, the British Commonwealth countries, and the United States, see Fischer (1996: chapter 7).
with German Jews, she argues that “the Holocaust plays a central role in contemporary Jewish life in Germany, indeed, that it is the element on which ethnicity is based” (Rapaport 1997:14). The Holocaust, then, is a central mental category on the basis of which, Rapaport argues, many German Jews define themselves and distance themselves from non-Jewish Germans; “The Holocaust provides the framework for representing the past, understanding the present and envisioning the future. It is their [German Jews’] ultimate metaphor, a part of their roots, the source from which the meanings they bestow to daily life are constituted” (Rapaport 1997: 24). Rapaport’s participants expressed a great deal of mistrust in and alienation from German society, as well as attitudes to which Wimmer’s (2013) concept of transvaluation could be applied, by viewing the “German character” as cruel and conformist. To the extent that relationships were carried on with Germans, these were viewed as “not typical Germans” (Rapaport 1997: 162). According to Rapaport, then, the mistrust and fear that has followed the Holocaust is the principle perpetuating the German-Jewish boundary.

Research Design and Methods

**Research Design**

The design of this study may, following Cresswell & Poth (2017), be characterised as phenomenological, in the sense that it “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Cresswell & Poth 2017:75). “Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view” (Smith, 2016). Aspers (2005), following Max Weber and Alfred Schütz, argues that a phenomenological concern for subjective meaning can be combined with an explanatory sociology, to “understand, and thereby explain” (Aspers 2005:155) a field of interest. While some common applications of phenomenological approaches in e.g. psychology focus on emphatic understanding without explanation in terms of causes, this study, then, takes its point of departure in the experiences of the interviewees, but attempts to make sense of these experiences by utilizing explanatory sociological theory.

**Interviews**
My data was collected through thematic interviews (Aspers 2011), starting from a series of predefined topics, but following the course of conversation allowing the topics talked about to be determined by what the respondents themselves deemed to be central to their Jewishness. Asking such open-ended questions is a good way to make sure that the topics discussed most are those that are also the most salient in the respondent’s own conception of their Jewishness, rather than being simply a reflection of the preconceived notions of the interviewer. A pilot study consisting of three interviews was carried out in the autumn of 2015. These interviews and the analysis of them were carried out in a more inductive, open fashion, without much of an idea of what to expect or how to interpret it. The pilot interviews influenced my choice of theoretical points of departure for the study. The other interviews, 13 in number, were carried out in the spring of 2017. The interviews tended to range between 30 minutes and 2 hours in length.

When conducting an interview, the interview situation is itself a social interaction in which interviewer and interviewee both play parts in co-constructing the recorded account (Gubrium & Holstein 1995; Aspers 2011:144-145). An utterance is always made with an audience in mind – the listener is never simply a neutral medium. In the present study, the self-understandings to which we have access are specifically those offered in an interview situation with another Jewish person. Since this paper argues that ethnic self-identification and presentation is partly determined by strategic considerations, it should be noted that a non-Jewish interviewer would probably have received somewhat different answers. My being Jewish contributed to making the interviews feel friendly, honest and pervaded by mutual trust. I think, then, that while no interviewer is “transparent”, it was much easier for me as a Jewish person to learn more about both how Jews talk about Jewishness to other Jews in confidence, and how they guide through a non-Jewish world in which they feel that they have to exercise some secrecy and caution (as we shall see later, some of the participants are reluctant to discuss matters related to Jews and antisemitism with non-Jews). Sometimes, the interviewees probably sensed that I have not myself tended to place that much significance in my Jewish identity, perhaps hoping that they would be able to “win me over” to a more unambiguous Jewish loyalty (for example, several interviewees strongly encouraged me to visit Israel) – this should not be seen as a “bias” in the results, but it should inform how they are read; as, in part, efforts at ethnic mobilization.

To elaborate on how I have thought about these interviews; recalling Wimmer’s taxonomy of means of boundary making (p. 3 above), it can also be seen that the interviews are useful in
two quite distinct ways; first, the interviewees’ accounts are themselves examples of the discursive construction of boundaries. But I also use the interviews to gain substantial information about things the participants have experienced or otherwise have knowledge of, including other means of boundary making, e.g. by learning how the participants have been influenced by their backgrounds. I have, then, seen these interviews both as examples of boundary making discourse, and as sources of various relevant facts.

Finding and choosing interviewees

Initially, interviewees were found by posting requests in various Jewish-related Facebook groups. Snowball sampling, with several starting points, was then employed by asking interviewees to recommend other potential interviewees. In this process, I strove to find a heterogeneous set of respondents with respects to age, gender, family histories, degrees of religious and community involvement, and places of origin. My informants were helpful in locating a varied set of people to interview. This should make it clear that this study is unable to claim that its participants are proportionally representative of Stockholm’s Jews. This is not a quantitative study allowing for inferences as to the proportions of Stockholm’s Jews that holds certain views, but a qualitative study that aims to describe in greater depth the range of ethnic narratives employed by Stockholm’s Jews. The sampling (a somewhat misleading term for research of this kind) has aimed for the greatest possible variations rather than proportional representativeness (Boeije 2010: 36-37). The study is limited to persons born after the end of the Second World War. This was done in order to limit the range of responses, as having no age restriction would have meant a “universe” of possible of interviewees that would have been more difficult to study exhaustively, and since the end of the Second World War marks an important historic turning point for the view of what it means to be Jewish.

My object is to understand how ethnic boundaries are maintained – I am not claiming to gauge the level of intensity of ethnic feeling of Stockholm Jews as a group. If that had been my goal, my current way of finding interviewees would have constituted a case of sampling on the dependent variable, since I have sampled my interviewees on the basis that they identify as Jewish, and since those with a strong Jewish identification were presumably more likely to contact me upon seeing my call for interviewees. I have rather attempted to find out; where Jewish self-identification does manifest itself, how can we understand it?
The study includes both persons born and raised in Sweden and in other countries. It could be argued that since I am studying the Swedish context, it would have made sense to limit myself to Sweden-raised interviewees, who have been socialised in the Swedish context, which is sure to have shaped the interviewees’ views on ethnicity. This would however have misrepresented the actual state of Stockholm’s Jews, many of whom are former immigrants. Instead I have opted to include four foreign-born interviewees, all of whom have lived in Sweden for more than 15 years, and to point out their places of birth when deemed relevant in the results section. It also needs to be noted that in limiting my study to investigating how Jews construct their ethnicity, I leave out the question of how Jewishness is co-constructed by non-Jews, and whether or not there is consensus in Sweden on the meaning of the Jew-Swede boundary. This focus was necessary given constraints of time and space, but I return to this issue in my suggestions for further research below.

Analysis

Analysis of the data was carried out continually while the interviews were still carried out parallely, allowing me to develop an understanding of the data in light of my theoretical framework while this framework was continually influenced by my findings (Boeije 2010; Aspers 2011). This reiterative process also facilitated a theoretical sampling; as the interview transcripts were coded and compared to each other, it became clearer along what dimensions it may be important to look for variation in cases (Boeije 2010: 112-113).

Analysis followed the following general pattern; first the interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were then read closely and annotated with comments and reflections, and subjected to an open (inductive) coding. Many patterns and contrasts in the data became apparent already in this process. A coding scheme was then developed by a combination of the most salient codes from the open coding and codes derived from my theoretical framework – the process of starting out with an open coding which is then used to develop a sparse, hierarchical coding scheme is described by Boeije (2010: chapter 6). The coding scheme, which finally came to consist in thirteen main codes, was then applied to the transcripts. The coding was used in the analysis by allowing me to gather all material pertaining to one code, which could then be reviewed and studied closely. Coding is thus in itself an integrated part of the analysis as it makes the researcher think about how to sort and categorise the data, bringing patterns and contrasts into view. When reviewing the data collected under the different codes, and thinking about it in light of my theoretical framework, mainly Wimmer’s
theory of ethnic boundary making, the most relevant codes turned out to be; experiences of antisemitism; intergenerational transmission; relationship to Israel; Swedish identity; history; and relationships to non-Jews. These codes formed the basis for the sub-sections of the results section, but they do not correspond exactly to them. The other codes were found to be less central to my research question, but all generalizations made in the results section were checked against all the data.

The findings of this paper are structured, in the next section, to let me develop my argument about how Jewish identification, culture, and past persecution are related to each other. While I utilize Wimmer’s taxonomy of boundary making strategies in my analysis, I am not aiming for a comprehensive and representative survey of all the different ways in which Jews construct ethnic boundaries, and I do not aim to give as much space to all possible forms of boundary making. It should be remembered that the purpose of the paper is to describe how the ethnic boundary between Jews and non-Jews is maintained; there are also many tendencies for this boundary to blur, but they are not the focus of this paper. This should be kept in mind by the reader to avoid an exaggerated impression of the distinctness and alienation of Swedish Jews. Quotations sometimes received minor edits for clarity as they were translated, deemed to not substantially alter their content.

**Participants**

Here, I will provide a short introduction to each of my interviewees, to help the reader in keeping track of them. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity;

1. Jack, aged 24. An aspiring medical student who recently came into contact with his Jewish identity, leading him to take part in a so-called Birthright trip to Israel.
2. Ruth, aged 58. A hypnotherapist and healer raised in Finland who recently reconnected with her Jewish identity and was at the time of her interview planning to finally have her bat mitzvah ceremony, which is usually held as a rite of passage at 12.
3. Daniel, aged 41. From New York, has lived in Stockholm for the past 10 years. After being raised in the Catholic church, by a Jewish mother and Catholic father, he found an interest in Judaism after coming to Sweden.
4. Ben, aged 45. An actor and comedian with a Polish-Jewish-Israeli-Swedish mother and a Swedish father. Ben’s interest in his Jewish background was kindled after he discovered the world of Jewish comedians and writers. Uncle of Nora.
5. Aviva, aged 40. Works in marketing. Raised by two Romanian-Jewish-Israeli-Swedish-parents. Her upbringing was marred by bullying by neo-Nazi youth; the failure of the adult world to address this led to distrust in Swedes and Swedish institutions. Sister of Aaron.

6. Aaron, aged 38. Brother of Aviva. Like his sister, the target of neo-Nazis when growing up, but this seems to have left less of an impression on Aaron. He has almost no contact with the Jewish community, but is proud of his heritage.

7. Elsa, aged 51. Lawyer, mother of Rebecka. Elsa and her daughter Rebecka were the only interviewees whose families had been in Sweden since the early 20th century.

8. Anna, aged 42. Intelligence officer at a state agency, born in Lviv, the Ukraine, then the Soviet Union. After facing severe antisemitism in the Soviet Union, she became interested in Judaism after coming to Sweden.

9. Rebecka, aged 18. Daughter of Elsa. Identifies strongly with her Jewishness, but takes a dissident stance towards Stockholm’s Jewish community, which she sees as pervaded by conservatism, unhealthy seclusion and a one-sided pro-Israeli sentiment.


11. Marcus, aged 31. Lawyer. Born in Stockholm to a Jewish father and Polish mother, but converted for the Israeli orthodox rabbinate to become a rabbi. After returning to Sweden and taking up legal studies he started finding fault with the Bible and is no longer religious.

12. Amelia, aged 68. Born in Poland in 1949. Came to Sweden during the wave of antisemitism that swept the country in 1968.


14. Harry, age 64. Harry found a deep interest in orthodox Judaism after his studies in anthropology led him to believe that Judaism’s ethics contains the solution to many of the sources of human conflict.

15. Johanna, aged 64. Teacher of Swedish for immigrants. Johanna’s parents were Holocaust survivors who spoke Yiddish when Johanna grew up in Stockholm. She is active in promoting and taking part in Jewish education and culture.
16. Ralph, aged 52. Owns an import company. After Ralph lost his parents as a child, he was taken care of by the Jewish congregation, two members of which adopted him. He was religious when he was younger, but not anymore.

Results

Pictures of the past: persecution and resilience

I will start by discussing the participants’ views on Jewish and family history, and how they influence the participants’ views of their Jewishness. It was common among the interviewees to understand one’s own Jewishness as intimately tied to the history of one’s family; thus, when I asked the interviewees at the outset of the interviews what it meant for them to be Jewish, it was common for them to start their replies by telling me where their families came from and how they had ended up in Sweden. Often this included fleeing from antisemitism, whether from the pogroms of Russia and Eastern Europe, from the Holocaust, or from the Polish antisemitic campaign of 1968. For some of the interviewees, this history of oppression was central for their very understanding of what it means to be Jewish and their pride in this identity. Aaron, for example, views with pride his family’s tenacity in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust, and put this pride front and centre of his Jewish identity, by speaking in one breath about his heritage and the persecution faced by his ancestors; “I’m more of an ethnic Jew than a religious Jew. I’m proud of my Jewish heritage and what my relatives have gone through”. Ruth, aged 58, when asked “What does it mean for you to be Jewish?” answered that “it’s about roots” and “belonging”. When asked to elaborate on the significance of these roots, she replied:

*I think it’s survival. Of course, many people have had it tough, but I have especially both read and heard from my relatives how, in particular, Jews and other minorities have been persecuted and harassed (...) It attracts me very much, this-, in English it’s called “coping skills”, to learn how to handle different environments and circumstances where, (...) your conditions for survival are limited. That’s largely what I feel I identity with, because I am also something of a survivor, so I like to think about what it is that makes people make it through tough circumstances.*

Ruth, then, who recently reconnected with her Jewish identity after two decades of being uninterested in it, identifies Jewishness with survival in the face of great hardship, and she
sees a parallel between Jews’ collective experience of resilience and the resilience which she strives for in her own life. This theme was echoed by Ben who made a remarkable parallel between the persecution faced by Jews and the abuse he had faced from his mother:

The Jews have always been persecuted but it has-, just like my upbringing with my mother was tough, but today I can say that I am grateful for some things, even if I did not want them. I don’t suffer from bad self-esteem, because my mom tried to take my self-esteem away from me, so I had to build it up. Do you see what I mean? (...) Persecution is not good, but it also made us great at assimilating.6

Ben, then, thought that both the persecution faced by Jews and the difficulties of his upbringing might in some sense build character, drawing, like Ruth, on Jews’ history of oppression as an inspiration for resilience and determination. Knowledge of the oppression and survival of Jews may then to some degree be experienced as inspirational, adding to the attractiveness of the narrative of what it means to be Jewish. Also on this theme, Ben made many references to the “bond” between Jews that is a result of their historic experience of being a minority, particularly a heavily persecuted one. Oppression is here reinterpreted as something that builds character and solidarity. Qualities that allow one to survive through oppression are upheld as worthy of reverence.

Numerous interviewees even explicitly cited the memory of the Holocaust as a reason to maintain and pass on their Jewish identities and to honour Jewish customs and culture. Many felt that doing so constituted a symbolic victory against the Nazi genocide and that it honoured those who had been killed for being Jewish. For Aviva, this took the form of a feeling of duty towards those murdered among her family members, and a feeling of guilt when she did not observe Jewish customs and rules. When I asked her about what her Jewishness means for her, she immediately came to talk about the Holocaust, moving remarkably quickly from ”belonging” to “duty”, “coercion” and “guilt”;

DG: How would you describe your relationship to Jewish matters, what does it mean for you to be Jewish?

Aviva: I think it’s a really big part of my identity. But I’m not religious, so it’s, like, a feeling of belonging, but also some kind of feeling of duty, uhm... What I, for me it means-

6 Ben used the word “assimilation” in a slightly non-standard way, to refer to something closer to what is normally meant by “integration”, with positive connotations.
I mean, I have very little family left because most were put in concentration camps, so there were not many who survived. So, I have probably always felt that a large part of the Jewish identity is some kind of duty towards those who survived, that I need to be a good person and to maintain Jewishness, that it would be messed up to just let it go, towards them, even if they in practice perhaps would not... no one would actually be angry, I think, but it still feels like I have to. There is some kind of duty, some kind of coercion, in Jewishness for me now.

DG: Mhm, OK, so can you get a guilty conscience then if you don’t...?

Aviva: Mhm [yes], like every Shabbes [Sabbath] I feel “well, I could do better”. Or if I’m going out on the Sabbath, I’m like “I should be home lighting the candles”. But I, it’s not so duty-, or, compulsive that I can’t do stuff – I do break it [religious rules] – but it’s still there in the background to give me a guilty conscience.

Similarly, when discussing his decision to keep a Kosher home for his children, Ben, the 45-year-old actor, mentioned family members perished in the Holocaust – as did Ralph when explaining why he keeps kosher himself. In all these cases, the commitment to fallen family members was cited as a motivation to not only maintain a Jewish identity, but to even feel obligation towards religious precepts, even though like most of my interviewees, these individuals explicitly described themselves as non-religious. Many mentioned the Holocaust in similar ways; Marcus said that identifying as Jew meant that “Hitler did not win”.

I want to make two points about what has been stated in this section; the first is that there is obviously a great need for many of my participants to engage with the past by interpreting the stories of their predecessors as heroic and inspirational, in a way that fits well with what Wimmer calls transvaluation; “reinterpreting[ing] historical defeat and subjugation into a heroic struggle against injustice and domination” (2013:58). Wimmer’s framework refers to actions taken with regards to existing hierarchies, not history; it seems, however, that some interviewees feel a need to advance transvaluatory narratives with regards to past oppression which has left many families with a deep trauma. Jewish resistance and resilience in the face of oppression is honoured; persecuted predecessors are revered for their tenacity and strength. This will be important to keep in mind later, as I will argue that one of the factors that cause Jews to feel somewhat alienated from Swedish society and motivates them to emphasise their Jewishness rather than their Swedishness is that it is only among other Jews that there is sympathy for this need to engage with the past, whereas the surrounding society by
comparison seems indifferent. As we shall see in a later section, the participants tend to think that Swedish society is nonchalant, indifferent and ignorant of Jews rather than hostile towards them. It does not seem to be correct, then, to say that the participants are attempting a transvaluation of their place in Sweden’s ethnic hierarchy of today; simply because it is difficult to say that Jews have a determinate place in Sweden’s ethnic hierarchy. However; interviewees’ statements about the past very much resembles what Wimmer describes as transvaluation.

The second point I want to make is that the interviewees’ discussions of their family histories illustrates well Wimmer’s thesis that ethnic conflict, especially in the form of oppression, stabilizes ethnic boundaries and make them appear natural. For the interviewees, Jewishness is viewed as the defining element of family history, leading one to view one’s family history as a reason to affirm one’s Jewishness. The main reason, in turn, for viewing Jewishness as the defining element of family history in this way is antisemitic persecution, because of which one’s family’s Jewishness has been entirely central to its destiny.

**The antisemitic threat and the shadow of the Holocaust**

With few exceptions, my interviews confirmed that there is a general feeling of an increased threat of violence towards Jews and Jewish institutions. The degree to which the interviewees felt safe or unsafe was however greatly varying; some felt unsafe to the point of considering leaving the country, while some felt completely safe. Both Anna and Samuel told me that many Jews they knew had left the country recently over safety concerns. While some interviewees had not personally been the victims of antisemitic abuse, others had. For example, the siblings Aviva and Aaron were repeatedly harassed and threatened in their teens by neo-Nazi youth – as we will discuss in more detail later, these experiences severely damaged Aviva’s trust in Swedish society. Nora and Rebecka had also endured antisemitic provocations by other pupils at school. Several interviewees attributed the fact that they had not been victimized to the fact that there was nothing that gave them away as Jewish to outsiders. Those who regularly wore Magen David necklaces had in some cases experienced hostile looks or insinuations. Many interviewees were accustomed to being careful to divulge that they were Jews to new acquaintances until they had come to trust them. In a group as small as the Jewish community, any violent incident is likely feel close to home. One
interviewee reported being a close personal friend of the parents of the girl whose 2015 bat mitzvah ceremony was attacked by an Islamic State-tied shooter in Copenhagen, killing one Jewish man standing guard.

Several Jewish commentators (e.g. Nudel 2017; Bachner 2011) have noted that when antisemitism is discussed in Sweden, it is usually talked about in past tense, for example by comparing contemporary racisms against non-Jewish minorities with the antisemitism of the Nazi era. In a much-debated incident in 2015, anti-racists in Umeå organized a manifestation in memory of the Kristallnacht of 1938. The manifestation served at a protest against racism today. The invitation for the event noted that racism against refugees, Muslims and Roma are on the rise; but antisemitism was not mentioned, and Jewish organizations were not invited to participate. Antisemitism, then, served as an historical lesson that should teach us to combat the kinds of racism that exist today, with the implication that antisemitism no longer exists or is relevant, having been replaced by e.g. anti-Muslim racism (Josephi 2015; Bachner 2011).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to document attitudes towards antisemitism on the part of non-Jewish Swedes. The relevance here is of the perception on the part of Jews in Sweden of such attitudes in their surrounding society. The above incident, and in particular the deep indignation expressed by many Jewish voices in the ensuing debate, illustrates something that also came through in my interviews; for many Jews, it seems that while the majority of Swedes are not particularly antisemitic themselves, the issue of antisemitism is ignored. It should be remembered that Jews make up about 0.2 percent of Sweden’s population. As some of my participants noted, the number is so small that the plight of Jews is hardly something that most Swedes think about regularly. Samuel thought that the state did not do enough to combat antisemitism, and when I asked him what he thinks about the general non-Jewish Swede’s knowledge about antisemitism, he answered;

*I think there’s some consciousness of the issue amongst those who take a particular interest in it, but most people don’t care. I mean, there are like 20 000 Jews in Sweden. That’s about the same number as there are Mandaeans in Sweden – how much do you know and care about their situation?*

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7 One of the organizers of the Umeå manifestation, it should be mentioned, later claimed to have invited Jewish representatives to the event.
The feeling of community with other Jews was often related to security in the face of the antisemitic threat; knowing that other Jews will show them solidarity and understanding in the face of antisemitism – which most interviewees do not trust most non-Jews to do. Thus, Ben said that there is a “silent code” amongst Jews that “when the shit hits the fan, it’s you and me”. Aaron, who faced bullying by neo-Nazi youth while an adolescent in the 1990s, when asked if he feels a special connection to people he has recently met upon learning that they are Jewish replied that such a feeling only obtains with Jews his own age who can share the experience of living through the neo-Nazi resurgence of the 1990s. Aviva almost never talks about her experiences of being Jewish with non-Jews, as she thinks they tend to be dismissive and ignorant about antisemitism. Meanwhile, many participants had little trust in the Swedish state, describing its reactions to antisemitism as ignorant or indifferent. As I will describe in more detail later, this was sometimes connected to a perception of Swedes and Swedish institution as having an anti-Israel bias.

To sum up what was been said in this section, and connect it to the argument of this paper: many Jews are worried by the increased threat of antisemitism in Sweden. Most Swedes, however, are seen to neither participate in, nor pay much attention to antisemitism. With Sweden’s Jewish population being so tiny, it seems to sometimes be forgotten by the majority population, among whom discussions about antisemitism often seem confined to the role of historical warning against other types of prejudice. The participants feel that the discussion of contemporary antisemitism tends to be limited to a small number of interested people, and that the Swedish state has failed to take the problem seriously. The common awareness of the antisemitic threat, the common understanding of that threat in light of the Holocaust, and the need to connect with others who share these preoccupations and concerns – namely other Jews – thus all constitute incentives and motivations for drawing boundaries against Swedes and instead emphasising the boundaries that unite all Jews.

**Swedish identity and lack thereof**

I now turn to the question of whether, and in what respects, the participants identify as “Swedes”, and what conclusions can be drawn from this. To address this question, it seems that we have to start by adding to Wimmer’s taxonomy of modes of boundary making; while Wimmer describes “contraction” and “expansion”, he actually lacks a concept for when two sets of boundaries between which emphasis is shifted are not nested in one another, but instead overlap. Shifting emphasis between the group “Jews” and the group “Swedes” is in a
sense a case of both “expansion” and “contraction”; advocating that Swedish Jews be regarded as a part of the Jewish people globally rather than a part of “Swedes” contracts the boundary against Swedes, while expanding it to encompass all Jews globally. I propose to call this mode of boundary making “expansion-contraction”.

Rapoport’s respondents tended to “see Jews and Germans as mutually exclusive dichotomous categories” (1997:146). This was not as clear cut among my interviewees; while some interviewees said they were not Swedish – for example Amelia who insisted that she was a “Polish Jew and Swedish citizen – (...) but not Swedish!” – several interviewees said that there is no contradiction between being Swedish and Jewish. But when asked to elaborate on this, it tended to turn out that to the extent that the interviewees did regard themselves as “Swedish”, many seemed to view themselves as “Swedish citizens” but not “ethnic Swedes”. Several interviewees used the words “Swedish” and “Jewish” in ways that implied that they were mutually exclusive, as in “I have both Jewish and Swedish friends”. Samuel did this, so I asked him if it that meant he did not consider himself Swedish; he replied that he does, but that he had meant “like Johan Andersson-Swedish”, confirming that there is some sense of “ethnic Swede” that he does not feel like a part of. Johanna also exemplified this tendency when I asked her about the relationship between Jewish and Swedish identity;

Johanna: Well, Swedishness... I am Swedish, regardless; I was born here, I am Swedish. At the same time, I'm Jewish. There is no contradiction. I’m a Swedish Jew. I don’t know why people often think... {Pausing, then changing tone of voice as when making a realization;} Oh, you mean nationally... well... It’s a very difficult question, about nation. It now happens to be the case since a number of years back that we have a national homeland. The homeland of the Jews is Israel. Historically that has not been the case. And that has been a problem for the Jews in a hostile environment, and I can say that it gives me a sense of security to know that we have a national homeland, given the history we have as Jews. I mean, I’m a very clear example, I’m the child of a [Holocaust] survivor. And if things would turn as bad as one often thinks, as the child of a survivor, and that’s not impossible – I mean, we see persecution in every country – and would a situation obtain where Jews are persecuted, I know I have security in the country of Israel. I’m not going to be persecuted in my own country. And the knowledge of this makes me safer. So, in that respect it’s connected to nation. It has to do with safety, quite simply. A knowledge that the Jews are a people, who also have standing as a nation. That’s a strength.
Here, Johanna says that she is Swedish in the sense that “I was born here”. At the same time, she describes Israel as the “national home” of the Jews and says of Israel that “I’m not going to be persecuted in my own country”. This seems to exemplify a civic, institutional, view of her Swedishness and an ethno-national view of her Jewishness; she is a Swedish citizen and a Jew by nationality. We will return to discussing the relevance of Israel for the participants’ Jewish identity later.

Several interviewees expressed that Swedishness was mainstream, normative, and devoid of content in a way that made it difficult to identify with. For example, although Ben had had a Swedish father and always lived in Sweden, he said he saw Swedishness as “too broad” to identify with – “It’s like saying you’re ‘European’ in general”. When discussing his feelings about Swedishness, Ben also related an interesting anecdote; when he and his family were watching the very popular televised Swedish musical contest Melodifestivalen, his son asked if they were going to call in to vote for a contestant. When Ben said he usually does not, his son asked, “Is that because we’re Jews?” Ben told this story with obvious pride and contentment, and said that it illustrates that “[as a Jew], you realize early on that you are not like everybody else (...) – we are distinct!” This anecdote illustrates a common theme in the interviews; a pride in disidentifying with the mainstream, even among persons who were “well-integrated” in the sense of being inconspicuous in and well acculturated to Swedish society. For many participants, belonging to a minority was an important part of his self-conception, and was something to be guarded against the boring, homogenous mainstream, as we will see further in the section on assimilation. There were, however, other times when the interviewees emphasised that they are a part of the Swedish people. Judaism/Jewishness is sometimes described as a personal attribute compatible with full membership in “the Swedish people” and e.g. romantic and friendship ties to non-Jews. This will be illustrated shortly when I discuss the case of Nora. It was also common for the interviewees to express that they “felt Swedish” when they were in Israel among non-Swedish Jews.

**Social closure and exogamy**

Wimmer’s theory views social closure as the behavioural component of boundary maintaining. With this in mind it becomes relevant to ask to what extent the participants close their networks towards non-Jews, since Wimmer’s theory predicts that an ethnic boundary will be porous and ill-defined if it remains at the cognitive level and is not accompanied by social closure. But while the participants are concerned to maintain the ethnic distinctiveness
of Jews, and thereby implicitly a categorical boundary between Swede and Jew, they are generally speaking not prepared to limit their social interaction, including choice of romantic partners, to Jews. The participants, however, are generally aware of the contradiction that inheres in wanting to maintain Jewish ethnic identity and prevent the assimilation of their children, while at the same time not wanting to make ethnicity a factor when finding a spouse. This contradiction is resolved in various ways; for example, when Elsa and her non-Jewish husband moved in together before they were married, Elsa realized that she had to lay out some unconditional requirements before they formed a family, even though they had no immediate plans to do so;

*I was very clear with [my husband] (...) that; “I love you, but this is a prerequisite...” (...) – and this was very strange of course, since we had no plans to have children at that point, but still, you have to be pragmatic as hell – “if you really feel that you will stand up for this, and really work to make sure that our children (...) receive a Jewish upbringing, that if we get a son he will be circumcised, and we’ll have Jewish traditions-, and if this is not OK with you all the way, then this ends here”. (...) And this was not easy for him to just say yes to, so we talked about it, he thought about it for a couple of days, and then he said, “OK, let’s do it”. (...) I remember it so clearly, this conversation and the feeling, so deep in myself, that this was the only thing I could do to be true to myself. I can’t do anything else – Judaism, it’s what I am! It’s nothing I can compromise with, you see, I can’t opt out of it, that’s not possible. It’s a part of me, my blood, my genes, my personality, everything – me! So, it’s either me, or not me. You can’t say “we’re going to do it fifty-fifty” or something, it’s not possible – this is me!*

Ben had struggled somewhat with how to think about these issues. When he met his first wife, he was not as invested in his Jewish identity as he later has become, and did not care that she was not Jewish. But when he realized that he wanted to pass on Jewish identity and traditions to his children, this turned out to sometimes be an uphill battle in a “mixed” family;

*If every Jew were to decide tomorrow to marry a non-Jew, then it’s gone – that’s the downside of assimilation. Especially if you’re living in Sweden where it’s like, ”aren’t you Jewish? What is it you celebrate again? What do you call it, Chanukka? Hm, should we do that or Christmas? I think we should just celebrate Christmas, so the kids won’t feel left out at school and we won’t have to get time off work for Yom Kippur” – and then it’s gone. So, it’s a struggle to be Jewish.*
He said that while he will always encourage his children to be with the person they love, regardless of ethnicity, he thinks that “if everyone did [the same], there wouldn’t be any Jews left at some point”. When Ben met his current wife, she converted to Judaism, and they are now raising their children with a strong Jewish identity – another way of resolving the tension. Aaron experienced the same tension in being dismayed at the thought that his child would not be considered Jewish according to Jewish law. Theoretically we would expect the will to maintain ethnic distinctiveness to sit uneasily with a universalist outlook on partner choice. This is confirmed by several participants, who had to struggle to reconcile these two positions; in Wimmer’s terms, a discursive, categorical boundary between Jews and others; but a reluctance to discriminate on the basis of ethnicity when choosing a partner.

Aviva and Nora – a comparison

At this point, it might be useful to look a bit closer at the experiences of two of my interviewees, who I think illustrate much of what has been said in the preceding sections; Aviva, aged 40, and Nora, aged 21, who differed from each other in significant ways. As a teenager in a northern Stockholm suburb in the 1990s, Aviva regularly faced antisemitic bullying from neo-Nazi skinhead youth. As a result of this, “Judaism felt more like a burden than anything else”. But what made her youth especially traumatic was not primarily the neo-Nazi youth themselves, but the complete lack of reaction from the adult world; “the worst part was that there was never any adult-, they saw what happened all the time, but no adult ever defended me, or told off those guys, or anything – nothing! (...) It felt like such a damned betrayal.” This indifference made Aviva feel unsafe; “If they don’t even react now, they won’t react if someone tries to kill me either!”

Today, Aviva worries a great deal about for the safety of herself and her son, and she and her husband has contemplated moving to Israel, the United States or Canada. Sometimes, she wonders if she is being silly and her worries exaggerated, “but then I think about my grandmother who told me how she had thought before the war that ‘nothing will happen, these are just rumours, people will protect us’”. As we saw earlier, Aviva’s relationship to her Jewishness is deeply shaped by awareness of the Holocaust. Moreover, she feels a great responsibility as a mother to pass on Jewish knowledge and identity to her son. Often, she said, the best part of her day is when she drops of her son at his Jewish school, in the presence of fellow Jews and proper security measures.
Aviva thinks that the Swedish state is ignorant and naive about antisemitism, and that it certainly cannot be trusted to protect Jews. She also avoids talking to non-Jews about her worries and experiences of antisemitism and said that her worries about antisemitism has had as a consequence that her relationship to non-Jewish Swedes is “just getting worse and worse”. But in general, most people seem to classify her as simply “a Swede”, which can sometimes be frustrating or confusing. When in her youth she came to a school with a larger number of ethnic minority students, she was at first happy to meet other people who could relate to belonging to an ethnic minority – but it soon turned out that the other students viewed her simply as “a Swede”, her Jewishness notwithstanding, exemplifying Jews’ ambiguous place in the “Swede/immigrant” dichotomy. Similarly, at her current workplace, she is viewed as a Swede; but her experiences of racism and alienation make it difficult for her to fully accept a Swedish identity;

DG: What is the relationship between Jewishness and Swedishness? Do you identify as Swedish? (…)

Aviva: It differs. Sometimes I can feel very Swedish, and think that I am Swedish, and in a conversation about Sweden I might say, “Us Swedes…”, but it always feels a bit wrong, like I don’t have the right to say that. And I can be very… well, at my workplace they talk a lot about how we need to become more multicultural; “all of us who work here are Swedes”, and then I think, “oh, I’m Swedish now? Do you really think so, or is it just because I haven’t told you that much about myself?” Because on some level I’m still always thinking that it’s going to be like it was when I was a teenager, that the minute the truth comes out, I’ll be screwed. Then I’ll never be included. So, it differs. But when I’m in Israel, then I feel Swedish [laughs].

Aviva, then, is unable to fully identify with Swedishness. She distrusts Swedes and Swedish institutions to protect her, to understand her experiences with antisemitism, and to sympathize with the fact that she is living in the shadow of the Holocaust. Most people she meets regards her simply as a Swede, and there does not seem to be any external impediment for her to assimilate, if she wanted to. Rather, she is actively struggling to pass on a Jewish identity to her son, out of a feeling of duty to past generations, not wanting to be the link who breaks the chain of a Jewish lineage. She is drawn to the Jewish community largely because there she finds others who shares many of these experiences;
DG: What is it that Jews share? What is this feeling of community built on, for you personally?

Aviva: I think it’s a bunch of very different things... I guess it’s that you share the same history, to a certain degree. You may have parents who are children of [Holocaust] survivors, so you have heard and experienced similar things – those are things that I pick up on, since it was such a large part of my childhood.

Nora stands as a contrast to much of what I have said about Aviva. Actually, Nora had also faced antisemitic harassment – a classmate had called her a “Jew whore” – but the school had taken it very seriously and she was happy with their reaction. As for the threat towards Jews, she has not noticed any increased threat level, and did not, in general, feel unsafe as a Jewish person. She was keen to pass on a Jewish identity to her future children – but her notions of Jewishness did not emphasize Jewish peoplehood. For example, this is what Nora answered when I asked if she thinks it is important to pass on Jewish identity to one’s children;

I really think that should be your own personal choice, just like with every kind of religion. I myself think it’s important to pass it on to my children, because that was how I was raised. (...) It’s important to be able to observe the holidays, perhaps have a bar or bat mitzvah, that kind of thing, but if anyone doesn’t want to, then, why should you? It’s a bit like if you were raised a Christian, and then you choose not to pass on your Christian faith – in Sweden, no one would have thought that was weird...

Here, Jewishness is explicitly seen as a matter of “religion” and compared to Christianity, not unlike how 19th century Jews presented their “Mosaic faith” as analogous to Christianity and compatible with full membership in the Swedish people. This statement can be contrasted, then, to the fact that it was very common for the participants to describe Judaism/Jewishness as “much more than a religion”. Nora, who in comparison with some of my interviewees was not heavily involved in the Jewish community, had not given much thought to the threat against Jews, and did not express any particular alienation from or distrust in Swedish institutions, rather regarded Judaism as a matter of religious tradition to be maintained to the extent one finds it rewarding, rather than something that constitutes an essential part of one’s self. Aviva and Nora are just individual cases, but I would argue that they are illustrative, if not in themselves proof of my suggestion that perceptions of Jewish peoplehood, orientation towards the Jewish community and alienation from Swedes and Swedishness are all tightly connected. Whether we emphasize one set of boundaries or another is likely to be influenced
by the degree to which the notion of “community” we thereby advance is one in which we feel safe and included.

Guarding Against Assimilation

The possibility of assimilation, that is, the absorption of Jews into majority society and the disappearance of Jewish identity, has long been seen by many as the main existential threat to the survival of the Jewish people. My participants, having been selected on the basis of their Jewish self-identification rather than representing a sample of all those with “Jewish background”, of course, showed little proclivity for assimilation themselves (although see the discussion of Nora above), but much of what they said indicated an ever-present threat of assimilation. This was especially evident when it came to the topic of raising children. When living as a small minority in a country were the means to full expression of some Jewish customs are limited, raising a Jewish child invariably requires parents to take a stand on what it means for them to be Jewish. To actually end up with a child who strongly and proudly identifies as a Jew and finds meaning in Jewish culture and history is no small feat, and those who had achieved it were quite proud of it. Elsa, the 51-year-old lawyer, exemplified both the pride of having children who embrace their Jewish heritage, and the ever-present threat of assimilation;

DG: And how has it gone, [raising your children take interest in their Jewishness], how much have they taken to heart?

Elsa: They’ve taken to the whole kit! [She goes on to list some ways her children are active in the Jewish community]. And that’s wonderful. (...) They have received that whole feeling of community. But they also know that it’s not easy.

DG: What is it that isn’t easy?

Elsa: It’s not easy to belong to a minority. I don’t think it matters if you’re Jewish or if you belong to another minority. Being a minority always means, for it not to disappear, it’s so easy to assimilate without even thinking about it, since the things that are not Jewish are all around you in your everyday life in a way that requires a certain knowledge to reflect on. So, you have to cherish it – it’s a responsibility, it’s a job, and it’s not easy, darn it! (...) I’m proud and happy about it.
Elsa, then, sees assimilation as something that happens, so to speak, automatically if it is not actively resisted through pervasive efforts to maintain Jewish knowledge and identity. We should keep in mind that orientation towards Jewish culture is not the same as identifying as Jewish; but if “Jewish” becomes an empty category devoid of cultural meaning, it would presumably be difficult to make sense of what it means to be Jewish, and identificatory assimilation is likely to result (see further the section on Jewish culture below). Elsa is proud of how she and her children have worked hard in passing on this knowledge and this identity - passivity, in this account, would have resulted in assimilation by default. As we saw above (p. 29), this picture was shared by Ben when describing the plight to maintain Jewish tradition in mixed families.

For many minority groups, the path to assimilation is closed and heavily guarded by the members of the dominant ethnic group. A lack of the required cultural resources or visual ethnosomatic differences may hinder inconspicuous inclusion in the majority group, depending on the barriers erected by the latter. For Jews, also, this has often been the case. Thus, to take one example, Celia Heller (1977) describes how the large majority of Polish Jews in the period between the two World Wars completely lacked the acculturation into Polish culture that would have been required to even attempt assimilation. Some wealthy and intellectual Jews were what Heller describes as “assimilationists” by which Heller means that they adopted assimilation as a “conscious program” (1977:183) – although try as they might, the assimilationists were not universally successful. In this context, then, assimilation required deliberate effort and was largely hindered by a resistant ethnic majority. For those I interviewed, the situation is different. The path of least resistance for many of Jewish background in Sweden is to adapt to the majority. One conclusion we may draw from this is that Jews are not hindered from assimilation by Swedes. It is not Swedes that block the path into Swedishness of Jews, but rather Jews themselves who resist assimilation. Jews, it would seem, are engaged in a boundary struggle with an opponent that is not even aware that there is a struggle going on. Guarding against assimilation, then, becomes a matter of boundary work, of expansion-contraction, drawing firm borders around the “Jewish people” and advocating identification with that entity. This is necessary in order to maintain the integrity and dignity of the Jewish people. By passing on a “Jewish consciousness”, Jewish parents maintain an ethnic boundary between Jew and Swede by encouraging their children to see themselves as ethnically distinct from majority Swedes.

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The question of why parents find it important to pass on a Jewish identity to their children is of course tightly connected to the overall question of this paper; why it is seen as important to maintain the ethnical distinctiveness of the Jewish people at all. Many of the interviewees tend to view Jewishness as an essential aspect of the self, denial of which means a life of self-denial and inauthenticity. As Hanna put it, and many others said similar things; “I think this is what it is like for people who don’t affirm their background and their heritage: you’re not a whole person, you lose out on what it means to be yourself and to be enriched by your different parts”. On the one hand, then, most share an essentialist view of ethnicity, which sees Jewishness, including an orientation towards Jewish culture as being transmitted through “blood”; on the other hand, there is a fear that Jewishness can easily disappear through assimilation if this is not actively guarded against. The explanation for this seeming contradiction is that those that assimilate are seen as still Jewish, but Jews who have “forgotten who they are”. “A person who is born a Jew”, as Anna put it, ”dies a Jew” regardless of her cultural orientation; but the life of an assimilated Jew is viewed as incomplete or inauthentic. Several interviewees also pointed out that it is good to be aware of one’s heritage since it makes one better prepared against antisemitism. What is more, assimilation is seen to endanger the entire Jewish community by weakening the bonds of solidarity that are required to guard against the next, inevitable attack on Jews.

**Israel – The Promise of Safety and Belonging**

As we saw in the theory section, nationality and ethnicity are tightly intertwined. As Wimmer argues, it was the rise of the nation state that created “ethnic minorities” as we understand that concept today. The entrenchment of the idea that government must represent “the people” as well as the exclusion of ethnic minorities from national communities then led to counter-nationalisms that argued for national autonomy for the now excluded groups. Zionism is a clear example of such counter-nationalism. Formed at a time when Jews found themselves excluded and marginalized in an age of fervent nationalism, the Zionist idea suggested that Jews are to be regarded as a nation in their own right; an idea that bore fruit in 1948 when the Israeli state was founded. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that many of my interviewees, with ambiguous feelings towards Swedishness, living in the shadow of the Holocaust, and worrying about the future for Jews in Europe, tended to have warm feelings towards Israel. Fischer (1996:174-182) shows that most members of Stockholm’s Jewish Congregation in 1994-1995 had strong ties to Israel; 75% had family there, and most said to at
least sometimes support Israel economically and to purposefully choose Israeli products. Most
of the participants in the present study also had close ties to Israel; almost all of them had
tavelled quite extensively to Israel and expressed deep fondness for the country. This
attachment was largely based on love for the Jewish cultural identity and feeling of
community in Israel, and many spoke of Israel as the only place in the world where Jews can
truly feel welcome and accepted, as well as a crucial sanctuary when and if antisemitism
again arises in Europe. Aviva, who faced antisemitic bullying and isolation in Sweden said that
Israel was the one positive thing she associated with being Jewish as she was growing up;

DG: But was there anything positive that you associated with Jewish matters, or was it
just this antisemitism and this feeling of being different?

Aviva: Well, what was positive was Israel. Israel was wonderful, we were there a lot
during the summers. And there you felt, well, a belonging.

The appreciation of coming to a country where one is not seen as different or special was
pervasive in the interviews. Even the orthodox Harry, who like many Haredim is critical of
Zionism, thought that Israel was a “fantastic” country to visit, “like being home”;

I did not need to explain if I’m a Jewish Swede or a Swedish Jew; I did not need to
explain why I wear a kippah or don’t wear a kippah; I don’t need to explain anything,
there is nothing-, I don’t stick out. I am one of everyone.

Several interviewees described their first visit to Israel as a catalyst for committing more
deeply to their Jewish identities. Jewish congregations all over the world arrange so-called
Birthright trips to Israel for Jewish youths which provide both a chance to experience Israel
and to connect with Jewish peers – Jack had recently returned from such a trip which had
played a large part in his development of a deeper connection to his Jewish “roots”. Anna,
after realising she wanted to learn more about what it meant to be Jewish, travelled to Israel
and instantly “fell in love” with the country’s “spirit”. This trip became a catalyst in her

8 It should be noted here that all of my interviewees were Ashkenazi. As Ashkenazi Jews, they felt
accepted as ethnically normative – but Israel has its own ethnic hierarchies, not just between Jews and
Arabs, but between the hegemonic Ashkenazim, and the more or less stigmatized Mizrahi/Sephardi and
Ethiopian Jews (see Mizrachi & Herzog 2012; Mizrachi & Zawdu 2012). Jews belonging to one of the latter
groups may not feel as ethnically inconspicuous and normative.
development of a Jewish self-image, and not long after she had returned from the trip, she left her non-Jewish husband.

The image of Israel as a sanctuary for Jews to escape persecution was very pervasive. Israel, since 1950, has a so-called Law of Return, giving all Jews the right to live in Israel and become Israeli citizens. Aviva had much more trust in the Israeli state than in the Swedish one;

*Israel is my sanctuary, and when I am at my saddest about the state of the world, I think “I’d rather die there than here”. There I at least know, there I can feel safe that somebody, the Israeli state, would try to defend me, and I’m really not certain of that here. I feel that I could be sold out. If a great power came and said, “give us all the Jews”, then I am incredibly unsure that Sweden would not just say “sure, you’re welcome, here, take them”. I don’t think they have learned anything.*

But it was not just those interviewees who worried this deeply about their safety in Sweden that valued the sanctuary provided by Israel; almost all interviews, even those for whom leaving the country was remote, had some notion about Israel being the place to go if the situation for Swedish Jews were to worsen. As Marcus said; “Israel is a big part of the identity as well, to know that you can always go to Israel when shit hits the fan.”

What many interviewees saw as an anti-Israel bias in Swedish media and among Swedes and Swedish politicians constituted a major source of distrust and alienation. There was close to a consensus among my interviewees that Swedish media is unfair, malicious and dishonest in its reporting on Israel, and that this reinforces antisemitism in Sweden. Several interviewees made a connection between what they viewed as the Swedish states’ indifference towards antisemitism in Sweden, and its hostility towards Israel. For example, when I asked Anna if she thought that the state takes antisemitism seriously, she cited the governments recognition of Palestine as an indicator that it does not. Johanna mentioned the possibility that a person may hold anti-Israeli sentiment as a source of trepidation when meeting new people;

*If I were to meet a completely new person, that I didn’t know before, getting to know a non-Jew, then it’s important for me to know-, I might be attentive towards anything this person might say that’s negative about Jews. This happens very seldom, of course, that is, some kind of hidden antisemitism. The other thing is if the person is very negative towards the state of Israel. That’s also a problem for me. If someone, for example, is very*
critical and questions the existence of the state of Israel, perhaps even starts talking
about Palestinians’ rights and such, that person I would not want to have anything to do
with, since it runs so directly against- I would experience that as a threat, since the
country of Israel gives me security, with my history.

Johanna, then, is made to feel personally unsafe when someone criticises the country which
for her is an important sanctuary, mentioning in this connection her history as the child of
Holocaust survivors. This sentiment was very common (although going so far as explicitly
denouncing Palestinians’ rights was not). Pro-Israel advocacy and activism also provides an
avenue to dedicate oneself to Jewish matters. There is even a specific term, hasbara, which
refers to pro-Israel advocacy on the internet, which is something that several interviewees
were more or less heavily engaged in. The Congregation, moreover, often makes Israel the
focus of its activities; for example, it arranges celebrations on Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel’s
Independence Day. Discussion of Israel and its conflict with the Palestinians is pervasive in
Swedish Jewish fora ranging from social media discussions to the long running magazine,
Judisk Krönika.

Israel, then, may serve as a focal point for Jewish identification and gives it legitimacy as an
independent nation and not just a minority in other nations. For those who would emphasise
the boundaries of “the Jewish people” rather than “the Swedish people”, and view Israel as
the national home of the former, Israel may even feel more like “my own country” than
Sweden. The Israeli state is largely perceived to be more reliable in safeguarding Jews than its
Swedish counterpart. We can now more clearly see the relevance of Wimmer’s theory of
nationalism and political representation. Provision of physical security and a sense of national
inclusion are chief tasks for a modern state. To the extent that Jews do not feel that the
provision of security fully extends to them, they turn instead to a more sympathetic national
entity. We should note that the sought after feeling of security has to do not only with physical
security itself, but with a state that has one’s best interest at heart, and which shares one’s
frames of understanding the threats to one’s security (see Aviva’s comment above; “I would
rather die there than here”). The relevant frame here is, again, the empathic understanding of
the trauma of past antisemitic persecution. Moreover, pro-Israel advocacy is a form of
ethnopolitical mobilization (one of Wimmer’s (2013:69-70) means of boundary making) that
itself strengthens ethnic boundaries by asking for loyalty to the Jewish nation and deepening
the sense of opposition to majority society; the perceived anti-Israel position of the Swedish
mainstream deepens the sense of “us versus them”.
Making sense of Jewishness by discovering Jewish Culture

A key point of the boundary making perspective has been to suggest that cultural differences do not track, or explain, ethnic boundaries. Do my results support this assertion? There are examples of when my interviewees experience themselves as ethnically different because of differences in cultural practices, such as cuisine, names, dress, language, and so on (for just one example, see Harry’s comment in the last section, p. 36). But this is not the entire story of the relationship between culture and ethnic boundaries. Another source of feeling of ethnic difference in this case, as I have argued, is the memory of persecution, and, crucially; the feeling of ethnic pride and alienation that results from that persecution often itself motivates Jews to seek out “Jewish culture” which they previously had no knowledge of. In these cases, ethnic difference cannot be explained by cultural differences, since it is the feeling of ethnic differentness which is the very reason to seek out the “different” culture. There seems, then, to be an important feedback mechanism at work here; both cultural differences and other causes for ethnic differentiation (as we saw in the section on the interviewees’ views of history, some explicitly stated that the memory of the Holocaust motivated them to keep Jewish culture alive) induce ethnic solidarity in people, motivating them to invest more heavily in what they consider to be the culture proper to the group.

My argument is then clearly not that the cultural differentiation is solely a result of persecution. However; several of my participants had, at some point in their lives, found a new interest in Jewish identity and culture – much like the Polish-Jewish immigrants described by Ilicki (1988), whose new-found Jewish cultural orientation was a result of their exclusion from the Polish national community that they had previously regarded themselves as a part of. In some cases, the participants in my study had gone from being almost totally indifferent and ignorant of Jewish customs to finding them immensely important. In such cases, their interest for those customs and cultural practices cannot be explained by socialization or habit. Rather, there was clearly some reason other than familiarity with the cultural practices themselves that made the participants consciously seek out Jewish culture.

I would like to illustrate the above line of reasoning by describing at some length the story of one of the participants; Anna. Anna was born in Lviv in the Ukrainian SSR of the Soviet Union in 1974. As Anna grew up, she and her family faced incessant antisemitism. Beatings
by classmates, blatant discrimination by teachers and government bureaucrats, harassment by neighbours and denied promotions by public employers (e.g. representations of all of Wimmer’s means of boundary making) was part of daily life for Anna and her family. Anna also deplored Ukrainians’ reluctance in the post-Soviet era to admit and denounce the antisemitism of national heroes such as Stepan Bandera. All of this behaviour on the part of both Soviet institutions and Ukrainian nationalists may, of course, be understood as boundary work with the intent of drawing clear lines between Ukrainians (or respectable Soviet citizens) and Jews. This was achieved, in the sense that Anna was always keenly aware of being Jewish – even though her upbringing was completely devoid of Judaism, Jewish culture and celebration of Jewish identity, her family always attempting to conceal that they were Jews. This state of affairs changed some time after Anna had moved to Sweden;

When we came to Sweden (...) I felt that a part of my life was missing – and it was actually because someone asked me ‘how do you identify?’ And it was an extremely difficult question to answer. I had a Swedish passport, so you could say that I had a Swedish nationality; I was born in the Soviet Union; my mother tongue is Russian, although I was born in Ukrainian territory – but almost no Jews from the Ukraine speak Ukrainian, they speak Russian; and, finally, I was Jewish – but what does that mean? I had no idea what it meant to be Jewish, so I sought out the Congregation.

Being asked the question “How do you identify?” triggered in her a need to place herself in an ethnic category to make sense of who she was. She began taking courses and studying Judaism with the Congregation, and even though she had never been taught about Judaism before, she immediately felt that the new knowledge “made sense”. She became deeply committed to what she sees as the values of Judaism – a transition she found to be “incredibly natural” as she already on some level knew about these values “under her skin” and “subconsciously” because she has “Jewish blood”;

Anna: For me, Judaism is not so much a religion as it is something you carry with you when you are born. I mean, you’re not any less Jewish if you don’t go to the synagogue (...) For me, Judaism is much more than a religion, it is a way of being (...).

DG: I’m curious about this. You say that one is born a Jew, so do you have these Jewish things with you if you grow up with Jewish parents, does it come even if you don’t receive a Jewish upbringing?
Anna: Well, you can see that I am an example. I was born a Jew, from Jewish parents, whose Jewish parents, and their parents, lived secularly and knew nothing about all things Jewish – but it’s still there under the skin. (...) I think it comes with your blood. It’s within us, all of us who are born as Jews, it’s there somewhere and all you have to do is dig it out.

The point I am concerned to make here is that since Anna’s time in the Ukraine contained no Jewish culture and no pride in Jewish identity, her consciousness of her Jewishness seems to be solely a result of the harsh boundary enforcement she faced as a Jew in the Ukrainian SSR. As Wimmer’s model suggests, harsh ethnic conflict will make boundaries appear sharp and make people take them for granted. This seems to apply well to Anna’s situation. Having realized that “Jew” was the ethnic category which was most meaningful for her, she then set out to fill that category with cultural “stuff”. This illustrates my argument, which is implied by Wimmer (2002:33; 2013:104-105) but remains largely implicit in his work, that cultural distinctions do not merely pre-figure ethnic distinctions, but are themselves used to mark and give substance to ethnic boundaries which already are perceived as significant.

Conclusions

We may now summarize the findings of this paper. First, I have argued that the antisemitic persecutions of the 20th century has entrenched the perception of the ethnic distinctiveness of Jews among Jews themselves. These persecutions also contribute to alienation from Swedish society, which does not share the same historical identity and frames of understanding. These factors in turn motivate the participants to maintain the ethnic boundary between Swedes and Jews and guard it against assimilation. I have argued that this kind of boundary work may be designated “expansion-contraction”, since it expands the ethnic boundaries with which one identifies to encompass all Jews globally, while contracting them to exclude Swedes. Ethnic consciousness also motivates Jews to endow the category of “Jewish” with cultural content, sometimes having lacked previous knowledge of Jewish culture; the cultural distinctiveness of Jews is thus partly a result of the ethnic boundary between Jews and others, and not just an explanation for that boundary. This finding constitutes an important theoretical point which is

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9 This is reminiscent of how the police offers studied by Siebers “[made] use of whatever ‘cultural stuff’ that is available (…) to make [ethnic] boundaries credible” (2017:616).
implied, but not much developed in Wimmer’s work. However; the participants are generally not prepared to restrict romantic bonds to fellow Jews; since social closure is required to maintain ethnic boundaries, this puts the participants in a contradictory situation of which they tend to be aware and attempt to solve in various ways.

A perception of a firm difference of ethnic or even racial essence lives on in some descendants of the survivors of persecution. For many of my participants it is taken for granted that ethnicity is a matter of essence. At the same time, I have argued that the discursive ethnic boundaries drawn by the participants may be analysed as strategic action. It is crucial, then, that this notion not be understood in a narrow way. As we have seen, the embrace of Jewish identity may include a great deal of pain, mourning and survivors’ guilt, as well as a partial alienation from the surrounding society. Moreover, it does not offer any apparent benefits in terms of social position, which might be the case in some other cases of ethnic self-(re)-definition. It seems, rather, that one embraces Jewish identity, and all the pain that comes with it, because one thinks that doing otherwise would be to live inauthentically – as we saw Johanna put it; “I think this is what it is like for people who don’t affirm their background and their heritage: you’re not a whole person, you lose out on what it means to be yourself and to be enriched by your different parts” (my emphasis). The definition of oneself as a Jew is not done calculatingly but rather reflects assumptions about reality.

However; a strategic analysis still seems to apply here, since although the ethnic distinctiveness of Jews is seen as “natural”, struggle is still necessary to maintain this distinctiveness. While the “vision of the legitimate divisions of society” (Wimmer 2013:63) is not itself “chosen”, there certainly is a conscious effort to make that vision relevant. Assimilation into the mainstream and the loss of authenticity is seen as an ever-present threat. The maintenance of Jewish peoplehood, including its manifestation in the state of Israel, is thought to be necessary to have sanctuary from the partly hostile, partly indifferent, surrounding society. Active struggle is thus needed to maintain the ethnic boundary between Jews and others – confirming the applicability of a strategic mode of analysis – even though Jewishness is perceived as a matter of inner essence rather than freely chosen. A primordial view of ethnicity on the part of ethnic actors, then, does not preclude the need for boundary maintaining struggle – this is a point that Wimmer actually does not make himself, although it seems a very important argument in favour of his strategic approach.
In addition to boundary maintenance, my participants are also engaged in transvaluation. Here as well my findings in this case study have relevance that goes beyond a particular interest in Jewish identity. The Jewish experience has sometimes been regarded as unique, and as Williams (2007) argues there has been a reluctance to place it in a comparative context. However, my findings on the need for transvaluatory narratives that reinterpret defeat and subjugation as inspirational tales of resilience and heroism as well as stresses the warmth and solidarity of one’s ethnic group in contrast to a cold and faceless mainstream bear clear resemblance to similar findings, not least in the work by Michèle Lamont (e.g. 2000) on North Africans in France and on African-Americans, as well as for example work on Ethiopian Jews in Israel (Mizrachi & Zawdu 2012). Future comparative work on this topic would do well to use Wimmer’s malleable and widely applicable framework.

While much analysis of the role of memory narratives in the perpetuation of ethnic groups approach collective memory through a bottom-up discursive analysis which stresses the “day-to-day” micro-level construction of ethnicity (e.g. Rapaport 1997), I have also attempted to also go beyond this approach by analysing not just micro-level discourse, but its historical determinants. As Wimmer argues, his model “offers a ‘full circle’ of explanation, as specified by Coleman (1990), Bunge (1997), and Hedström (2005), leading from macro to micro and back to the macro level again” (2013:112).

**Suggestions for further research**

I have argued that the participants of this study often find themselves struggling to maintain the integrity of the Jewish people in the face of a society which threatens to assimilate them, erasing the boundary between Jew and Swede. This implies, then, that there is a disagreement between Swedes and some Jews on how to view this boundary. However, as I have noted earlier, since this study has focused on the perception of an ethnic boundary between Jews and Swedes among those Jews who do perceive, and struggle to maintain, such a boundary, it has not directly investigated the degree to which there is consensus or contestation on the meaning of the boundary. Given my limitations in space and resources, this narrow focus was necessary, but further research should also ask how non-Jews and assimilationist Jews view the Jew-Swede boundary. Wimmer’s theoretical framework contains a plausible account of

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10 See also the special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* on destigmatization, edited by Lamont & Mizrachi (2012), as well as Thomas et al. (2016) and Witte (2017).
the degree to which consensus on the location and meaning of boundaries is achieved through a process of ongoing negotiation and cultural compromise (Wimmer 2013:97-101).

References


