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1. Introduction

*“The last thing that comes to my mind
when I think of Alaska is Judaism.”*

(Matthew, Interview 13)¹

Alaska and Judaism – two words with seemingly no connection. While many people associate Alaska with nature, wild life and space, less are aware of the fact that there is a considerable number of Jewish people living in Alaska or that Alaska was considered as the last refuge for Jewish people fleeing the horrors of the Second World War. Or that of Alaska’s total population of about 735,132 (in 2014) roughly 0.8% (~6,000) identify as Jewish, which is about the same number of Jewish people currently living in Vienna. Only 6% of those 6,000 (Frozen Chosen), however, were born in Alaska – like many other people living in Alaska they came there to ‘get off the grid’. The larger part originally came from the rest of the United States or from Europe. Most of the Jewish communities in Alaska started to build up only in the last few decades and are thus still relatively young. While the Jewish diaspora that is spread all over the world has been subject to many books (Levy/Weingrod 2005; Ehrlich 2009; Wettstein 2002; Habib 2004), few people consider the Jewish communities of the North when dealing with the global Jewish diaspora. With an increase in population of 1,958.3%² since the 1970s, the Jewish population of Alaska, however, is definitely worth considering. They identify as Jewish, many by choice (through conversion), and also as Alaskan, even if they were not born there. But living in the far North is generally challenging, and even more so when one seeks to live a life observing the Jewish traditions. As a consequence, many essential Jewish traditions are ‘bent’ to fit the North’s climate and extreme differences in temperature and light. (Sheskin/Dashefsky 2014)

Judaism is to be regarded as a rather complex example of a religion since, in contrast to other religions, it is considered by many to be a culture rather than a religion and numerous people

¹ Matthew was one of my interviewees during the fieldwork I conducted in May 2015. The complete list of conducted interviews can be found in Chapter 11.1. All names appearing in this thesis have been changed in order to ensure my informants’ anonymity.

² In 1971 there were 300 Jewish people living in Alaska, in 2014 there were 6,175, which means an increase by 5,875 or 1,958.3% (Sheskin/Dashefsky 2014: 20)

convert to Judaism in order to be part of a ‘Jewish lifestyle’ without aiming to actually lead a Jewish life in the religious sense. They simply want to belong to the Jewish community and feel like they are part of this worldwide Jewish diaspora. With Jewish people living all over the world and still feeling like they are members of this one, global Jewish community, it is important to ask what Jewish identity actually is, what constitutes it and how Jewish people living in such different places far away from each other can still feel like they share one common Jewish identity. Despite often heard quotes like the one by Matthew, one of my informants, I have discovered that there is more than a random connection between Judaism and Alaska, and furthermore that the two can even go hand in hand – at least for the ~6,000 Jews living there as of 2015. The nature of this connection will be examined in the master thesis at hand.

1.1. Motivation

When learning in February 2015 that my university was offering a field excursion to Alaska as part of my master’s program, I was instantaneously determined to go because I had been interested in Northern regions of the world ever since I could remember. After graduating from school, I had already worked in the Anne Frank House for one year and had then been working as a guide in the Jewish museum Vienna for several years already. The focus of my empirical bachelor’s thesis was on educational programs on the Holocaust³. More or less to continue in this tradition I randomly googled whether there was a notable link between Alaska and Jewry while having no prior knowledge on this matter and feeling quite ludicrous while doing so, not expecting that anything noteworthy would come up. Much to my surprise, however, I immediately found several articles on the ‘Frozen Chosen’ (as Alaska’s Jewish communities like to refer to themselves) currently living in Alaska and the fact that Alaska once was considered to become a safe haven for those European Jewish refugees who had no place else to go, way into the second World War. Although this plan was never actually

³ In this thesis I chose to use the term ‘the Holocaust’ to describe the mass murder of millions of Jews during the Nazi era, instead of the Hebrew term ‘Shoah’. I use ‘the Holocaust’ because it is the term used in the cited theoretical framework and by my informants. For reasons of convenience and to avoid confusion, I thus chose to use the same term as my sources, although I personally find ‘Shoah’ more fitting since it does not entail the meaning of a ritual sacrifice. (Antisemitismus 2007)

realized, I became immediately interested in these current Jewish communities that were residing in Alaska despite all the difficulties that come with a (religious) life in the far North.

1.2. Research Questions

The main questions I was initially interested in concerned the extent to which the Holocaust contributes to the Jewish identity in Alaska and in what way this is being commemorated; what Jewish life looks like in Alaska; whether people are religiously active and whether they are confronted with anti-Semitism. With these interests in mind I went into the field trying to remain as open and perceptive as possible for any relevant aspect that might present itself to me. In the course of my actual research activities my focus shifted slightly. While the Holocaust and its relevance for Jewish identity are still an important issue in my research the main question I seek to answer in the course of this thesis is: **how is Jewish identity constructed and maintained under conditions of remoteness**. To further specify my research interest, I also developed some sub-questions: “Does remoteness contribute to a particular understanding of one’s Jewish identity and the way it is lived?”; “Is there such a thing as an Alaskan Jewish identity?”; and “Does being Jewish in Alaska differ from being Jewish in other peripheral/remote settings over the world?” Furthermore, I am interested in the relevance of the Holocaust for the construction of a Jewish identity in Alaska: “Is the Holocaust a unifying element contributing to the maintenance of a collective Jewish identity?”

1.3. Overview

This thesis is comprised of ten chapters, the first one being an introduction to this research, my motives and my research questions. In the second chapter, I present the theoretical framework, which should be seen as a basis for my empirical findings as it is an examination of the basic terms that are important for this thesis: identity, ethnicity and remoteness. In chapter three, the methodological approaches used in this research project are presented. Chapter four is to be seen as a preface to the presentation of my empirical case study: it consists of a historical overview of Jewish life in Alaska in order to provide the reader with

some vital background information as well as with an overview of the collected data of my research. Chapter five is the first of five chapters that describe the findings of my empirical research alongside some theories on the respective aspect presented. It focuses on Jewish identity and religiosity in Alaska whilst examining existing academic literature on the religious, ethnic and cultural dimensions of Jewry. Chapter six deals with the ‘social sphere’, that is the social relations between Jewish and non-Jewish Alaskans, as well as with the social relations among the Jewish communities themselves. This chapter also contains a subchapter on my informants’ experiences of anti-Semitism. The topic of chapter seven is remoteness and its influence on the make-up of Jewish identity. Chapter eight examines the role of the Holocaust for Jewish identity in Alaska, and chapter nine the topic of the Jewish diaspora and connection of the Alaskan Jewish communities with Israel. The conclusion finally includes a short comparison of the Alaskan Jewish community with the world’s southernmost Jewish community in New Zealand, summarizing the main findings and answering my research questions while linking the empirical findings with the theoretical framework.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter comprises two subchapters, each dealing with the general concepts of terms that are crucial for the examination of my empirical findings. The first one presents the concepts of identity and ethnicity as well as Baumann's idea of the 'multicultural triangle'. The second subchapter outlines different definitions of remoteness.

2.1. Identity and Ethnicity

In order to answer my research question, I need a number of theoretical concepts to contextualize my empirical findings. Therefore, I will now undertake a short discussion on theoretical concepts on identity and ethnicity from different theoretical perspectives. The basis for any paper on a specific kind of identity is the exploration of the meaning of the term 'identity' as a whole. According to Schildberg (2010: 49ff.), identity can be brought down to personal identity (on an individual level) and collective identity meaning the identity of a certain group. When dealing with identity, it is crucial to underline that it is to be understood as a continuous process, as Stuart Hall notes:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 1990:222)

Identity is constructed through the process of self-ascription and of ascription by others (Barth 1969, Eriksen 2002). It depends on the respective agent to decide how much relevance to give to a specific part of their identity. Simultaneously, the ascription applied to us by others is also an important factor in determining the importance of this specific part of our identity. Identification is closely related to identity, built on the recognition of a common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group. Like identity, identification is a process never completed, and it can always be sustained or abandoned (Hall 1996: 2). Gingrich (2004: 4) takes the concept of these two factors, self-ascription and ascription, further and describes them as 'othering' and 'belonging', which according to him "are mutual constitutive components of identity." Othering is the act of differentiating between oneself and other people/another group while belonging is based on the identification with other

people, focusing instead on the sameness one shares with a certain group. Identity thus consists simultaneously of these two elements, belonging and othering, both of which “include evaluative and emotional characteristics from which the individual derives self-esteem, or a sense of knowing or belonging” (ibid.: 6).

Having assessed the concept of identity I will now turn to ethnicity, a part of identity (Sen 2006), which Frederik Barth also discusses in his renowned publication ‘Ethnic groups and boundaries’ (1969). Here he states that, while ‘ethnic’ may often be used to refer to groups with “a shared identity, a common history, and a traditional cultural heritage (...), these features may not in themselves provide the best basis for analyzing and understanding ethnic phenomena” (ibid.: 5). Instead, Barth proposes to emphasize on

1. ethnicity as a form of social organization
2. ethnic identity as “a matter of self-ascription and ascription by others in interaction” (ibid.: 6)
3. “the cultural features of greatest import are boundary-connected” (ibid.)

Above all, Barth urges to focus the investigation on “the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (ibid: 15). Andreas Wimmer (2013: 3) deals with Barth’s concept of the boundary metaphor in his book ‘Ethnic Boundary Making’. According to Wimmer, social and symbolic boundaries emerge “when actors distinguish between different ethnic categories and when they treat members of such categories differently” (ibid.). To illustrate this, Wimmer (ibid.) uses the example of a person identifying as Swiss, thereby already creating a boundary and excluding the non-Swiss. Any helpful act towards another Swiss person because of their being Swiss then implies discrimination towards all those belonging to other ethnicities. Alongside Barth himself and other authors (Juteau-Lee 1979; Lamont/Mólnar 2002), Wimmer (ibid.: 4) calls for a reassessment of these boundaries: to show how they emerge in the first place and

how and why they might be redrawn to include new groups of people or exclude hitherto accepted ones, how they might become blurred, fuzzy, and porous and perhaps eventually dissolve altogether, or, to the contrary, remain stable and persist over time.

Equal to identity, ethnicity is not static but dynamic. According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1993: 32) it is fluid, dependent on its agents and can, to a certain degree, even be manipulated and formed by them. Its relevance varies in different social situations and “it is often up to the agents themselves to decide upon its significances” (ibid.).

2.1.1. The Multicultural Triangle

To conclude this chapter on identity and ethnicity, I now want to elaborate on Baumann's thoughts expressed in his idea of the 'multicultural triangle'. According to Baumann (1999: 18ff.), the multicultural triangle is made up of three corners, one being the state or nationhood; the second being the idea that ethnicity is the same as cultural identity; and the third being religion. The first addresses how modern states act as executors who have the power to declare who belongs, as in who is a majority and who is a minority, and due to which difference this categorization is justified, for instance religion or ethnicity. When writing about the second corner of the triangle, Baumann explains that "the idea of ethnicity has one great advantage over that of 'the state': no one needs abstract thinking to know what it is. It is roots – where I come from, what makes me who I am, in one phrase, natural identity. Or so it seems" (ibid.: 19). Baumann goes on to ask, why then we cannot take the concept of ethnicity to determine one's sole identity, in an absolutist manner? Ethnicity primarily means ancestry: it expresses a connection to ancestors from sometimes thousands of years ago, "(...) descent, that is, the tracing of persons from ancestors, is an act of present-day memory looking back, as opposed to an authentic act of genealogical bookkeeping" (ibid.: 20). Baumann also ensures to state clearly that, even if there were a true descent for most members of an ethnic group to certain ancestors, ethnicity is basically a copied version of the concept of 'race' in the 20th century, and that "if human behavior was determined by genetics, which it is not, the genetic differences among humans are far too small to account for the cultural differences we know" (ibid.). To conclude this discourse on ethnicity he states:

Ethnic identities are thus nothing more than acts of ethnic identification that are frozen in time. As the social climate gets colder, they can go into deep-freeze and harden; as the social climate gets warmer, they can unfreeze and melt into new forms. (...) ethnicity is not an identity given by nature, but an identification created through social action. (ibid: 21)

Finally, as the third corner of the multicultural triangle, Baumann presents religion. One reason he gives for this is that "religion can sound absolute, that is, it can be made to sound as if it determines objective and unchangeable differences between people" (ibid.). Especially the last two, ethnicity and religion, need to be viewed as cultural identities and have a crucial relation, for they often coincide. There are several examples where this is the case, one of which being African Americans in the United States, bringing their own religious beliefs with them. This of course also applies to Jewish people, who in the Third Reich were "forced,

by the Nazi regime to view their religious difference as an ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ difference” (ibid.: 54). Having pinpointed the three corners of this multicultural triangle, Baumann then goes on to show what is in the center of the triangle: the ‘magnet of culture’, surrounded by the nation state, ethnicity and religion. Whereas those of essentialist beliefs tend to base their arguments on the corners of the triangle, Baumann advocates for a transformation of these elements into more discursive ones. Although it may be more practical under certain circumstances to simply speak of ‘Germans’, ‘Asians’, ‘Christians’ or ‘Muslims’, following Baumann’s conclusion it is more fruitful to define culture as being made by people. “It only exists in the act of being performed, and it can never stand still or repeat itself without changing its meaning” (ibid.: 26). This ‘processual’ view of culture, as Baumann refers to it, focuses entirely on culture coming to life, on social interactions between people, and is thus much closer to reality.

2.2. Remoteness

*“Remoteness is not so much
a place as a way of being.”*
(Harms/Hussain 2014: 362)

In the subchapter at hand I will now turn to the essential topic behind the findings of my research: remoteness. It is what I suggest makes being Jewish in Alaska different from being Jewish anywhere else, especially in less remote areas. But to answer questions with regard to identity in remote areas, one first needs to explore the term ‘remoteness’ itself and attempt to define what it entails.

Remoteness has been an important subject in anthropological theoretical discussion since the very beginning, as initially it was common practice to do research primarily in distant, more remote regions. As Edwin Ardener stated: “There is clearly something in the idea that distance lends enhancement, if not enchantment, to the anthropological vision” (Ardener 2012: 519). The reason behind this motive of first and foremost studying those who live in remote places was because ‘remote’ was set equal with ‘isolated’, meaning “a discrete and bounded society which could be viewed at a distance (hence constructed as remote) and

described in its entirety and clarity” (Harms/Hussain 2014: 364). Although this focus on doing fieldwork mainly in regions far away and difficult to reach has subsided and although the geographical distance itself has experienced a decrease in importance, remoteness is still a crucial topic in anthropology today. (ibid.: 362)

Bringing together the different attempts at defining remoteness by several anthropologists, it does not necessarily become easier to clearly define the term ‘remoteness’. The result is instead a rather dynamic concept of what remoteness could mean, allowing for a more flexible use of the term and application of its concept to situations which initially were not thought to have any relations to remoteness. As already quoted in the beginning of this subchapter: “Remoteness is not so much a place as a way of being” (ibid.), which also entails that, while originally places were remote and, if sought out, one had to go to very distant locations, remoteness is actually not limited to a certain region but much rather a specific way of being – and this could be found in anyone and anything. It is dynamic, relational, and transformable. Harms and Hussain sum this up as follows:

Its meaning is neither fixed nor determined by a geographical metric, but emerges out of sociocultural processes which are themselves situated within structural conditions, including but not limited to: the economics of land, the socio-cultural production of space, the geopolitics of national borders, the politics of ethnicity and citizenship, struggles for social services and inclusion, or conversely, state evasion.
(ibid.: 363)

Often, what is remote can be found in a place in close geographical proximity, and hence, in addition to being understood as a spatial concept, it also has to be regarded as a state of mind and a mode of social practice. Remoteness is not static, but always made, unmade, and transformed. (ibid.: 362ff.) In relation to remoteness as a state of mind, Ardener (2012: 523) even states that a long period spent in a remote place does not make the place less remote but instead the *person* who has come to the place more and more remote. Harms and Hussain (2014: 365) attribute a certain relational strangeness to remoteness while clarifying that conceptions of remoteness “typically emerge from within structures of familiarity”, the remote thus being often defined in contrast to familiar spaces. Furthermore, the authors (ibid.: 364) associate a certain ‘edgy feeling’ with being in a remote place, “where the relations of inside and outside, near and far, proximate and remote are always contested”. They argue that looking at edges and remote areas can be very productive, as does Anna Tsing (1994: 279) by using the term ‘margins’ “to indicate an analytic placement that makes evident both

the constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion and the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group's existence." According to her (ibid.), margins are "sites from which to see the instability of social categories (...), the zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability, where contradictory discourses overlap, or where discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge (...)." Certain things thus only become apparent on the margin, and we as anthropologists have to focus our attention on the edges, the margins, the remote, in order to be able to see something familiar and supposedly well-understood take an unfamiliar form and to attempt more thorough conclusions.

A more practical approach to the definition of remoteness can be observed when looking at an article by Huskey and Morehouse (1992: 129), who have done research mainly in Alaska, Canada, and Northern Scandinavia, but also Australia's Northern territory and Micronesia. The regions they investigated in the course of his research were remote in the geographical, the economical, and the political sense as well as situated in the First World: they examined regions that were "relatively simple parts of large, complex nation states that have elaborate constitutional-legal systems, rich economies, and overarching, dominant cultures" (ibid.). Interesting is also another of Huskey's articles where he states (2006: 148): "Remoteness will depend on the question asked", which is a very poignant statement on remoteness and perhaps the best definition I have encountered in my research on this topic because it manages to illustrate the complexity of remoteness in very few words. Considering these many different perspectives on the definition of remoteness I find it important to also include Halfacree's (1993: 34) proposal to carefully distinguish between remoteness (referred to by him as 'rural') as a locality and as a social representation as the two are not always the same. Before proceeding with the characteristics, the identifying elements of remoteness that Huskey lists in his article, I would like to conclude this first part of the subchapter on the definition of remoteness with a quote by Harms, Hussain and Shneiderman (2014: 378): "The ambivalence associated with remote places suggests that the making of remoteness as an idea, (...), is never complete, as there is no singular meaning that we can attach to it." This quote presents a good summary of the content of this subchapter defining remoteness as a very open and incomplete concept rather than as a clear and definite one.

Writing about the WRSA annual meeting⁴, Huskey (2006: 148) reports that close to 70% of all papers presented at the meeting were focused on Alaska or Canada, regions “of highly developed, liberal democratic nations”. In the minds of the participants in a session on remote regions during this WRSA annual meeting, “there is something special about these regions that make them unique in their home countries” (ibid.: 148f.). About the North Huskey says that it “suffers extremes of climate and relative isolation. Remoteness can be partly defined by the physical character of the region” (ibid.: 149). Other identifying factors for remote regions have been identified by the same author (ibid.) as the importance of an indigenous population in these regions as well as the presence of environmental extremes, being situated on an economic frontier and isolated from urban places. Huskey’s collection of identifying factors of remoteness seems very simple and clear. In the texts by Ardener and by Harms and Hussain the formulation of the characteristics of remoteness is more complex and cautious. According to the latter, an important factor in determining a place’s remoteness is to examine the degree of its connectivity to surrounding regions. While two locations may have the same distance to a third location, their connectedness to this third location may not be the same. Harms and Hussain (2014: 364) state this difference, this “sense of apartness” to surrounding regions, as a condition for remoteness, which must also take into consideration issues of power, as remoteness “is a process situated in dynamic fields of power” (ibid.).

I was particularly fascinated by Ardener’s approach (2012: 523) implying that remoteness can be described as crossing an invisible one-way border, which, however, can only be felt when crossing it. Once inside, this border seems to vanish and instead one is left feeling vulnerable with “an almost exaggerated contrary sense of the absence of any barrier to the world” (ibid.). To outline what constitutes remoteness he lists and discusses several paradoxes, the first of which deals with strangers. Ardener (ibid.: 527ff.) states that people living in remote areas share a wide definition of strangers so that they will always appear to be numerous, regardless of the actual number of strangers. Additionally, strangers remain marked as strange for a long time, which leads to an accumulation of strangeness. These strangers, or incomers, according to Ardener almost always become entrepreneurs. Secondly, a high number of innovators can be found in remote areas, the paradox being that remote areas are always subject to a high degree of change and intervention. Due to this high level of innovation, there is usually also a high level of failed innovations, of ruins of the past.

⁴ The annual meeting of the Western Regional Science Association.

Another paradox that Ardener lists is a constant contact with the world and a focus on the scarce possibilities of reaching other parts of the world: the one road or the one ferry that leads away from this specific region. Most important in Ardener's (ibid.: 531f.) theoretical considerations on remoteness, however, seem to be his classification of 'event-dense' and 'event-rich'. To undertake this kind of classification it is necessary to look at what counts as an event. According to Ardener not every happening counts as an event, but only those happenings with a particular significance. Surprisingly, it is the central areas that he categorizes as being event-poor as the happenings in these areas are much more regular and essentially automatisms with only rare instances of a major singularity, which he calls 'prophetic situations' (Ardener 2007). In contrast, remote areas are event-rich, with continuous singularities.

Event-richness is the result of the weakening of, or probably the continuous threat to, the maintenance of a self-generating set of overriding social definitions (...), thus rendering possible the 'disenchantment' of individuals, and that overdetermination of individuality (...) (ibid.: 531)

Event-richness can thus occur in any social space, and all individuals are potential singularities in their respective social space. "Since remote areas are singularities in the total or wider space, all singularities there are reinforced" (ibid.: 532). The lesson of remote areas is that they are not simply a periphery but a periphery not properly linked to the dominant zone. Furthermore, they are perceptions from the dominant zone.

The feature of a 'remote area' (in our technical sense of a singularity of a particular type) is that those so defined are intermittently conscious of the defining processes of others that might absorb them. That is why they are the very crucibles of the creation of identity, why they are of great theoretical interest, and why the social anthropologist 'at home' may be very far indeed. (ibid.)

In these very last sentences of his article, Ardener summarizes the essence of remoteness: its singularity and how this singularity and this being defined by others ultimately makes of remoteness a space for the very creation of identity. How exactly remoteness and the creation of identity are tied together in the particular example subject to this research will be discussed in more detail in chapter seven.

2.3. Conclusion of Theory

In this theoretical review I have reassessed the general signification of the concepts of identity and, closely related to it, ethnicity. Both concepts ought to be seen as dynamic, fluid processes, subject to changes and their agents' choice to a certain degree. At the base of identity are self-ascription and ascription by others (Barth 1969, Eriksen 2002), which Gingrich (2004) takes further and ultimately describes as 'belonging' and 'othering', the first being acquired through identification, the latter through differentiating between oneself and others. Similar to identity, ethnicity also depends on self-ascription and ascription by others. It is a form of social organization and one should ultimately focus on the symbolic boundaries that are a by-product of ethnic identities, encouraging people to help some and not help others, depending on their ethnicity. (Barth 1969, Wimmer 2013) Baumann (1999) developed his concept of 'the multicultural triangle' to illustrate different agents' roles in constituting the meaning of culture. As agents (and corners of the triangle) he lists the nation state, ethnicity and religion, culture being in the center of the triangle. He argues for a less ancestry-focused definition of ethnicity as ancestry and ethnicity are too often just an act situated in the present of looking back. Instead he points out that ethnicity is in reality ethnic identification, which can easily harden or melt, depending on the social climate of the surroundings. (ibid.: 17ff.)

To present these notions of identity, ethnicity and the multicultural triangle has been important in order to lay the groundwork for the presentation of my empirical findings⁵ and the more detailed theories I will be linking these results to, focusing not on identity and ethnicity in general but more specifically Jewish identity and its complex position at the intersection of ethnicity, culture, and religion.

⁵ See chapters 5-9 of this thesis.

3. Methods

In the following chapter I want to further elaborate on the chosen methods for conducting my research in Alaska. For the field practice at hand mainly qualitative research methods were used, with ‘qualitative’ referring to any data and evaluation techniques that focus on the content analysis of complex information rather than on quantity. (Beer 2003: 11) Beer (ibid.: 12) continues by stating that it is in fact not the data itself that are either quantitative or qualitative but merely the technique of evaluation that is applied. Considering this statement, data that were collected by using the method of participant observation can be evaluated in a qualitative or quantitative manner – or even both at the same time. Beer introduces an example to underline this statement: when analyzing an interview, one could look at the way a certain topic is addressed but also count how often a certain word appears. The counting of a specific word can, on the other hand, also be the base for a more qualitative evaluation approach aimed at exploring the reason why a certain word is reiterated during the interview. This example illustrates that a clear distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods is not always entirely possible.

For this research I decided to use a combination of multiple research methods and selected these methods based on my previous experience with data collection within the past years. I therefore applied a triangulation of methods using multiple methods and methodological perspectives within one research project. (Flick 2014: 12) The traditional method of ethnographic fieldwork – participant observation – seemed most fitting for general observations and informal conversations during events and casual meetings or interactions with people in Alaska, and in particularly suitable for my visits to the congregations and my participation in religious events while there. In addition to participant observation I chose to conduct interviews in order to deepen my understanding of certain aspects that appeared and to gain more extensive knowledge of what motivates different Jewish people to live and stay in Alaska and to reflect freely on how their being Jewish interacts with Alaska as a place.

Overall, the methods I chose worked very well for this particular research. Especially the combination of ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews was suitable as they allowed for the most flexible approach, when it came to data collection, providing the

researcher with both a guideline but also with flexibility for a quick re-adaptation of the further steps within the research process.

3.1. Constructing the Field

With my general research topic being Jewish identity in Alaska, my field of study consisted of different locations in Alaska where Jewish people live and where there are such congregations. This gave me the opportunity to explore several locations and collect a very diverse set of data located at different places, small and big, from Reform and Orthodox communities, from different age groups and genders, from academics and non-academics, which I felt was a good base for writing this thesis.

About 5,000 (and 81%) of Alaska's Jewish population live in Anchorage (Sheskin/Dashefsky 2014: 20), the most populous city in Alaska. Fairbanks, Juneau and the region of the Kenai Peninsula each have Jewish communities of a few hundred people. (ibid.: 59) There are five synagogues in Alaska: four of them are Reform and one is Orthodox. The four Reform synagogues are Beth Sholom in Anchorage, OrHatzafon in Fairbanks, Briat Elohim in Sterling (located in the Kenai Peninsula south of Anchorage) and Sukkat Shalom in Juneau. The Orthodox synagogue Shomrei Ohr, which is run by the Chabad Lubavitch movement, is situated in Anchorage and also runs the state's only Jewish museum which was opened in 2014.

Due to prior communication with the congregations I visited entering the field was not a difficult task. From March 2015 onwards I had spent a lot of time finding potential interview partners and opportunities for participant observation while in Alaska. Shortly before leaving I had already had somewhat fixed appointments with different women from the Reform congregations in Anchorage and Fairbanks as well as the curator of the Jewish Museum in Anchorage and two acquaintances of my thesis supervisor Prof. Dr. Schweitzer from the University of Fairbanks.

During my research in Alaska, of the five congregations I visited the three biggest (Beth Sholom and Shomrei Ohr in Anchorage, OrHatzafon in Fairbanks) and talked to some of

their members as well as the two rabbis (Fairbanks is without a permanent rabbi) and other leading figures within these congregations who are responsible for administrative tasks. I also visited the Jewish museum in Anchorage and spent an entire afternoon talking to its curator, who also showed me around the Orthodox synagogue and community center right next to the museum. In Valdez I coincidentally met two Jewish people who had come to Alaska for the summer, and they called one of just a handful of other Jewish people living in Valdez, whom I then had the opportunity to interview. Most of my research was done within the Reform congregation Beth Shalom, which is also Alaska's largest and oldest Jewish congregation. In addition I did some spontaneous research when randomly meeting Jewish people, like in Valdez, and when talking to non-Jewish Alaskans about their knowledge on and awareness of the Jewish communities.

3.2. Ethnographic Fieldwork: Participant Observation

Although my research was not a typical example of ethnographic fieldwork, I certainly implemented elements from it wherever I could. So, while I did not live within the communities into which I wanted to gain insight, I grasped every opportunity that presented itself in order to deepen my understanding of the field and participate in as many events or group gatherings as possible. One of my two main research methods was participant observation because it allowed me to undertake a thorough and multidimensional research approach to gatherings with several people. Any group gathering of members of a congregation turned out to be of a complex nature, with factors such as group dynamics and multiple perspectives on the same issue heavily influencing the atmosphere and communication in general. Participant observation is the only method that allows the researcher to simply visit certain places and participate in events and to do research at the same time. Only by using this method can spontaneous interaction within the group become part of the collected data without the researcher becoming the center of attention and disturbing (and thus altering) the natural processes of interaction. One can simultaneously observe body language and non-verbal reactions to what is said. Taking body language into consideration can help understand the emotional status of a person and thus understand processes that might only be going on in the background – and this allows for a deeper analysis of the situation to take place. Participant observation can therefore be adapted to any

situation that might arise during field research and does not require a specific structure or order. It allows for maximum independence and flexibility while doing research as well as for the observance of any important factors that might arise and for the researcher's engagement in interaction by informal conversations or remarks, if required.

Hauser-Schäublin (2003: 34) states that generally a more unobtrusive role should be assumed when practicing participant observation. It cannot be reproduced and entirely depends on the place and the people participating and how they interact with each other. Participant observation requires a high degree of awareness with all senses in order to be able to perceive things that might not be perceived otherwise (ibid.: 37). Moreover, this method enables the researcher to truly arrive in the field, gain first impressions on the composition of the respective group and develop more concrete aspects that should be addressed in the course of the research. (ibid.: 44) In contrast to other research methods participant observation enables the researcher to do research spontaneously, without previous preparations. The researcher can thus quickly change into the role of a participant observer when a relevant situation arises. During the field research, I would often assume this role when hearing remarks that were relevant for my research. After an informal conversation I would quickly jot down the most significant points of the conversation or record myself repeating them. Participant observation allows for the simultaneity of the roles of the researcher and the private individual. One disadvantage of participant observation, however, is that one certainly needs to be able to remember many different aspects until there is time to write them all down into the field diary. Often a situation that is relevant for research arises without prior expectation, and it is already too late to ask whether one might record this or take notes. Some people may have problems with being recorded. In order to quickly repeat the many aspects that I deemed relevant for my research after certain informal conversations I used my mobile phone and recorded myself directly after the respective conversation to save the most striking points that were made and my thoughts for later, when I would have the time to write them down in more detail. This proved to be a very efficient method as it is certainly easier to quickly repeat things that were just heard minutes before using one's own voice rather than writing them down – in particular when the immediate surroundings do not provide suitable conditions for this.

3.3. Semi-Structured Interview

As a second method for this research I chose the semi-structured interview. This is a form of interview which is partially structured and is especially useful when the researcher aims to do multiple interviews which should be comparable for data evaluation. The base of the semi-structured interview is a written guideline containing all the aspects and most crucial questions that should be addressed during the interview. The researcher can then return to this guideline during the interview to keep an overview. A big advantage of the semi-structured interview is the flexibility it allows for the researcher to change the order of the questions at any point during the interview and to ask additional questions or leave out questions if required. As it is only a semi-structured interview, the interviewer or interviewee have the option of introducing new aspects by themselves. Simultaneously it still provides security in case the interviewer has lost the thread and needs to reaffirm the next questions to be asked, which is especially helpful when the interviewing person does not yet have any profound experience in the conducting of interviews. (Schlehe 2003: 79) Mayring sums up the advantages of this type of interview as follows:

The interviewee can answer freely, without having to orient him-/herself by already-formulated answers. The interviewer can thereby check whether the interviewee has correctly understood the question asked. Furthermore, the interviewee is free to express his/her perspectives and interpretations openly, as well as to draw conclusions on the connections between different aspects and phenomena. This kind of communication process in a semi-structured interview also enhances a relation of trust between the interviewee and the interviewer. (Mayring 2002: 68f.)

I chose this as my second main research method in order to deepen my knowledge about aspects that were only introduced in relatively short or superficial manner. I wanted to ensure that my interviews would give the interviewees enough space for a free narrative and at the same time enable me to keep an overview of the most crucial points I wanted to be covered during the interview. Additionally, the interviews I conducted needed to be somewhat comparable for the evaluation of my data, something that cannot be achieved as easily when only conducting narrative interviews. All the interviews I conducted were recorded with the help of my mobile phone.

3.4. Data Analysis

Since I took notes in my field diary during all instances of field research (participant observation, as well as informal conversations and interviews), I had many pages of field notes at the end of the fieldwork, as well as several audio files containing the interviews I conducted when a recording was allowed for. As suggested by Lotte Hoek (2014: 107) in her chapter on sorting data after a research period has ended, I read through my field notes again and again with time spans in between in order to allow myself to gain distance from the material and then observe which persons, events, terms etcetera kept on reappearing during my notes. I also listened to all the interviews and transcribed them using the software 'Express Scribe', then did the same as with my field notes: assess which subjects keep on reappearing. This left me with a list of specific aspects that seemed crucial to several of the people I encountered in the field and was a general assessment of my data enabling me to properly evaluate my data by summarizing and generalizing the text into codes. In a further step towards the organization and analysis of my data I used the concept of 'open coding' associated with grounded theory research and qualitative content analysis according to Mayring. To choose the grounded theory approach seemed fitting because it "does not require the researcher to use a particular theoretical lens through which to read this evidence" (Willig 2014: 145) but instead is based on an empathic approach. Participants are therefore "treated as witnesses whose accounts provide useful information about social and psychological processes" (ibid.). To do this I developed inductive codes for the overall analysis of my data by immersing myself in the data and studying my notes closely in order to see what the material itself tells me, rather than approaching my field notes with a certain hypothesis pre-formulated in mind and thus using deductive coding. (Bernard 2011: 430)

The data I collected were thus step-by-step assigned to the different codes that presented themselves to me through those data, each code becoming a collection of similar quotes and themes drawn from my body of data. This was the basis for the presentation of the data in this thesis enabling me to compare and connect the different topics that arose during my participant observation and interviews as I used the same codes for every interview and instance of field work as well as for the structure of this thesis. (Mayring 2002: 114ff) Developing these codes was not as easy and straight-forward a task as it was in previous researches I have conducted because many of the themes I am interested in are closely interrelated and it is hard to draw a clear line between them. Before I began to write this

master thesis I decided to listen to all the interviews again and check whether the codes I had initially come up with still made sense. Detecting that they were perhaps too basic and general I made them more detailed and added new codes as well, thus re-assessing the whole material in order to ensure an in-depth evaluation of the data.

4. Empirical Case Study



Figure 1: Woman blowing a *Shofar* (Photo taken by Justas Pipinis, Anchorage, May 2015)

Despite there being no apparent connection between Alaska and Judaism, Jewish symbols or objects and Hebrew terms continuously kept on appearing during my fieldwork proving that there was in fact a connection - and a strong one indeed. An example would be a visit to a local and popular coffee shop with a glass case of available foods in which I immediately spotted a sign saying 'kosher dogs'. Another example is our accommodation in Fairbanks that had colorful windows in the ceiling of its entrance hall featuring a Star of David and a depiction of two stones with the Ten Commandments in Hebrew on them - despite the owners of this guest house not being Jewish. In yet another three instances other members of our group came excitedly to me and told me of what they had seen: one saw a woman walking down the street with a *Shofar* in her hand; another a man with a sign saying: "Help me, I'm Jewish"; and the third had taken a picture of a whiteboard with a menorah⁶ drawn on it. Moreover, I found out just recently that there was a popular TV show in the early 1990s called 'Northern Exposure' on a Jewish man from New York City who is sent to practice as a doctor in Alaska, partly focusing on the different problems that arise with being Jewish in the far North. These anecdotes and pictures are meant to show that there is a strong connection between Judaism and Alaska where hardly anyone thinks there is one. Contrary to my expectations I didn't have to go and look for this connection; it rather came to find me.

Alaska is generally considered to be the place for runaways, free spirits, those who want to escape – and Jewish people are no exception to this. Very few of the Jewish people currently living in Alaska were actually born there, most came to Alaska from other parts of the United States and the world, in many cases to escape home, and in some of those cases also to escape the Jewish community at home. One of the first things I heard about being Jewish in Alaska was "People come to Alaska to *not* be Jewish" (Mitchell, Interview 3), and while I initially thought that this might just have been his opinion, this sentence, or similar versions of it, kept on reappearing during interviews. Milton, whom I interviewed in Fairbanks, told me that any 'real' Orthodox Jew will ask a Jewish person in Alaska: "Why do you live in Alaska?" (Milton, Interview 6), referring to the difficulties that come with trying to observe the holidays or even just the most basic traditions of Judaism in Alaska.

⁶ A seven-branched candelabrum used in the Temple.



Figure 2: Star of David (Photo taken by the author, Fairbanks, May 2015)



Figure 3: Ten Commandments (Photo taken by the author, Fairbanks, May 2015)

Almost any tradition involves some rule bending in Alaska, the most basic being the observance of *Shabbat*⁷, which usually starts at sunset. However, it is inconvenient for most people to go to a *Shabbat* service at 11:30 pm during the summer and therefore it is mostly celebrated at Seattle time, which would be around 9 pm at that time of year. Some of my interviewees, especially those who were not members of any congregation, felt that, while they had been brought up as Jewish and being Jewish was a part of their lives, their Jewish identity did not go much further than observing some of the major holidays and passing a certain sense of Jewry on to their children. They did not keep *kosher* and go to the congregation, and they generally did not consider it important or necessary for themselves to be a part of a wider Jewish community and be surrounded by other Jewish people. Very few of the people I spoke to were actually born into a Jewish family in Alaska and most of them were teenagers, so the Jewish community in Alaska is very young. Most members of congregations were from other parts of the US and some were also converts. This was one of the most surprising aspects I encountered during my research: that a considerable number of people came to Alaska and only then found their connection to the Jewish community and converted to Judaism. Some of those converts had a Jewish father and were thus not officially considered Jewish and therefore decided to convert after getting to know the Reform Jewish communities of Fairbanks and Anchorage, because they were so welcoming. So while some came to Alaska to *not* be Jewish, a few others came to be just that: Jewish; and all of the converts I spoke to were extremely active and observing members of their respective community often also helping out with the organization of different events, like a *Torah*⁸-study class. One young man who is a convert always wears his *kippah*⁹.

Having presented the groundwork of my research, that is the methods and the theoretical framework for my project, I will now proceed by presenting a brief history of Jewish Alaska and then continue with the actual results of my multi-methodological research in Alaska in May 2015. I will present these results in accordance with the codes I developed when analyzing my data material through the method of qualitative content analysis after Mayring

⁷ Shabbat is the weekly Jewish resting day starting shortly before sunset on Friday evening and lasting until Saturday night. It is celebrated by lighting candles, reciting a blessing and having a specific meal. A number of activities are prohibited on Shabbat like working or lighting a fire.

⁸ A scroll containing the first five books of the Bible; it is the basis for Jewish teaching in general.

⁹ A small round cap made of cloth worn by Jewish men during services in the temple. Some choose to wear it at all times.

(see chapter 3.4). The developed codes cover a wide range of topics, from what Jewish people in Alaska associate with their Jewish identity, to the extent of their religiously motivated practices and the relations to other Jewish people, congregations, and non-Jewish Alaskans. Other important themes are the significance of the Holocaust for Jewish identity in Alaska, as well as its position within the Jewish global diaspora and its relation to Israel. Each chapter will deal with one of these aspects, the chapter names referring to the different dimensions of Jewish identity. The chapter names were inspired by Andrew Buckser, who used a similar technique for his book 'Life after the rescue – Jewish identity and community in contemporary Denmark' (2003), in which he writes about 'The Religious World' or 'The Social World' of Jewry in Denmark.

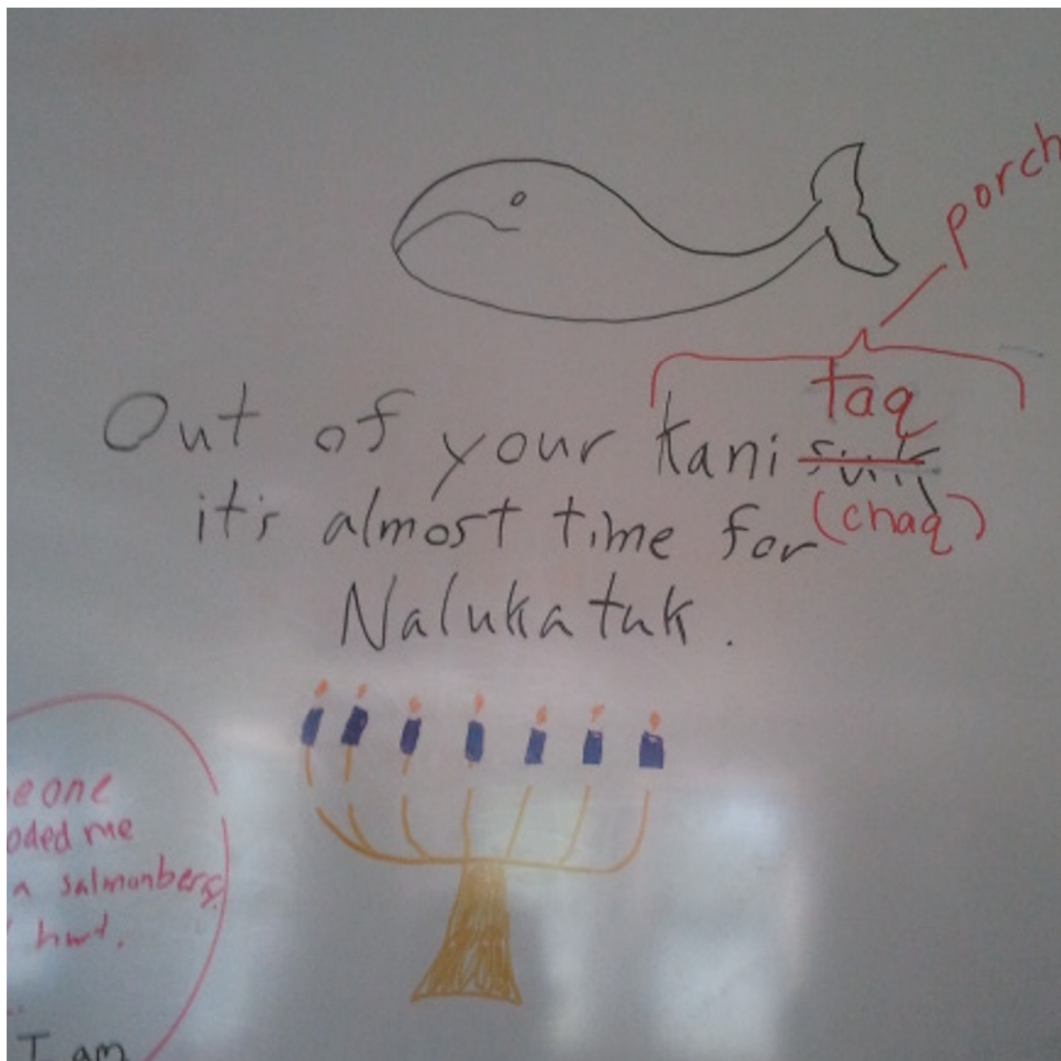


Figure 4: Drawing of Menorah (Photo taken by Nora Steinbach, Fairbanks, May 2015)

4.1. A Brief History of Jewish Alaska

The perhaps best-known incident of Jewish Alaskan history was the plan to turn it into a last refuge for Jewish refugees from WWII Europe but the history of Jewish people in Alaska goes back much further than that. Jewish people played a big role in the development of Alaska as it is today – much of its infrastructure goes back to the first Jewish settlers, who were among the earliest settlers of “the Last Frontier” (Rosen 2012). As quoted by journalist Yereth Rosen, Patti Moss (a historian living in Juneau) says:

It’s because of the Jewish presence that Alaska was developed when it was. (...) The first banks: Jewish people. Railroads: Jewish financing. The first college: East Coast Jewish money. The entire infrastructure of Alaska was built by Jewish people, Jewish money and Jewish knowledge. (ibid.)

According to Rosen (ibid.) it is believed that the very first Jewish people actually came to Alaska with Vitus Bering on his expedition in the 18th century working as traders. From the 1850s onwards many Jews from San Francisco who were fur traders worked closely with the Russian-American Company, and Bernard Postal (1960: 167) suggests that it was mainly due to the potential these Jewish people saw in Alaska that the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 took place thus significantly shaping Alaska’s history. After the sale Jewish traders, miners, fur dealers et cetera came to the far North from San Francisco, two of which founded the ‘Alaska Commercial Company’ in 1868, which “financed some of Alaska’s first mining ventures” (Jewish Virtual Library 2016). It was at the same time that the first services were held: Sitka had become a proper town with a small but thriving Jewish community and one Friday night traveler Emil Teichmann heard unusual sounds, which he described in his published diary ‘A Journey to Alaska in the Year 1868’:

I had never heard a sound there in the evenings, but on that night my curiosity was aroused by the murmur of several voices in the adjoining room (...) Looking through a crevice I saw quite an assembly of some twenty men all of the Jewish persuasion, who were holding their Sabbath services and reading their prayers under the leadership of the oldest man present. It was a memorable thing to see this religious gathering in so strange a setting and it said a great deal for the persistence with which the Jews everywhere, even in the most remote countries, practice their emotional exercises. (Teichmann 1963: 199)

Among the first Jewish families to settle down in Alaska was the Gottstein family, who eventually founded a warehouse business in Anchorage that later merged with ‘Carr’s grocery’ to form ‘Carr-Gottstein’ and is still a big grocery store chain in Alaska to this day.

In the late 1890s, “Jews began coming to Alaska in sizable numbers during the Gold Rush” (Jewish Virtual Library 2016), and some of them stayed even after the Gold Rush subsided. In the early 1900s there was another gold rush, this time in Nome on the far Western side of Alaska. There a Jewish congregation was initiated and about sixty Jews attended *Rosh Hashanah*¹⁰ services; in 1901 they even founded the state’s first Jewish organization: The Hebrew Benevolent Society. This community ceased to exist after World War I. In 1906 there was already the first proposition to turn Alaska into a refuge for Jewish people from Russia who sought to escape persecution and pogroms; but it was rejected by the US Congress. (Jewish Virtual Library 2016)

The second time that it was proposed that Jewish people should take refuge in Alaska was in 1938, when a few German-Jewish families wrote letters to the American Department of Interior asking for permission to settle down in Alaska and writing that they are ready to do any kind of work. Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes and a few others liked the idea and proposed to establish a “haven for Jewish refugees from Germany and other areas in Europe where the Jews are subjected to oppressive restrictions” (Rosen 2012). President Roosevelt’s plan was to resettle 10,000 people to Alaska every year for five years but only 10 percent of them would be Jewish so as to diminish criticism. Ickes used economic rather than humanitarian arguments in support of his plan claiming that the arrival of Jewish people in Alaska would open up opportunities in the industrial and professional fields that were closed to them in Germany. Very few were in favor of this plan; an editorial even declared: “Alaska wants no misfits and none who are unprepared to make their way without becoming a burden upon the territory” (ibid.). One of the plan’s biggest opponents was one of the most influential Jews living in Alaska at that time: Ernest Gruening, Alaska’s longest-serving territorial governor, who declared it would be political suicide to support such a plan and instead focused on his plan to make Alaska the United States’ 49th state. The turning down of this plan is still present today, and in 2007 writer Michael Chabon even published a fictitious novel called ‘The Yiddish Policeman’s Union’, imagining what Alaska would be like had the plan gone through. (ibid.) As already stated in my introduction, in 1971 the number of Jewish people living in Alaska was still quite low with about 300 of them until 2014 it had risen to 6,175, which is an increase by 1,958.3%. (Sheskin/Dashefsky 2014: 20)

¹⁰ The Jewish New Year celebration.

One of very few, if not the only, study of Alaskan Jews at present comes from Bernard and Joel Reisman and was published in 1995 called “Life on the Frontier: The Jews of Alaska.” Contrary to what they expected, namely, to find a predominantly male, politically conservative Jewish population, less educated and more alienated from Judaism than their counterparts nationally, he found that Alaskan Jews actually tend to be more educated than their national counterparts and that they are well represented in public life and politics. A fifth of Alaska’s judges were Jewish at the time of his study including the state Supreme Court Justice.

4.2. The Present

In 1995 the Reismans wrote in their study: “I believe these Jews are a prototype of the next generation of American Jews” (Reisman/Reisman 1995: 2). At the beginning of their paper, the Reismans (ibid.: 7) express interest in much the same questions that drove me while doing my research in Alaska. They ask themselves “what happens to Jews when they live in a ‘frontier society’, such as Alaska” (ibid.), with fewer other Jewish people around and little, if any, Jewish infrastructure. Despite a 2009 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Lipka/Wormald 2016) finding Alaskans to be among those who least identify with a religion, the Reismans found that Jewish Alaskans strongly identified with their religion, suggesting that they pose an exception from Pew’s findings. Even a high rate of intermarriage often results in the children being raised as Jewish. But since the Reismans have undertaken their research and published their results in 1995, much time has passed, and it is my goal in this thesis to look at this main question that they and I share in the light of my more recent research, more than twenty years after theirs. While there may have been very little Jewish infrastructure when the Reismans did their research in Alaska in the early 1990s, the circumstances have certainly changed and there are now, as already mentioned in chapter 3.1 ‘Constructing the Field’, five synagogues and two permanent rabbis, as well as a *mikvah*¹¹, a Jewish museum (since 2014) and Jewish community centers that belong to the bigger synagogues in Anchorage with incorporated pre-schools or other educative programs for

¹¹ A ritual bath for specific purposes, such as cleansing after the menstruation or to complete the conversion process.

Jewish kids, teenagers and adults, such as summer camps and Hebrew courses. There are lectures and presentations, purchasable T-Shirts from the Jewish museum and the congregation OrHatzafon in Fairbanks (which they sell in order to raise money for their permanent rabbi fund) as well as a Jewish film festival (the world's most Northern) that has been going on for 18 years now and thus began just a few years after the Reismans' research.



Figure 5: Frozen Chosen T-Shirt (Photo taken by the author, Vienna, August 2016)

4.3. Data Overview

At the base of the results contained in this chapter are the data I collected using several methods between May 12 and May 30, 2015, when on the field trip to Alaska under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Peter Schweitzer and Mag. Susanna Gartler together with 17 other students. During this three-week timeframe I practiced participant observation on multiple occasions and had countless informal conversations with Jewish and non-Jewish people living or temporarily residing in Alaska and thirteen interviews in total, each lasting between 45 and 120 minutes, with the exception of two group interviews that lasted about 20 minutes. Of these interviews eight were with individuals and five were group interviews – two of these groups consisting of four people and three consisting of two people. In the case of my interview with the rabbi of the congregation Beth Sholom in Anchorage it started out as an individual interview but we were later joined by Rebecca, who also works at the congregation and who helped me organize several interviews with members of Beth Sholom. All of the interviews were semi-structured. The locations of the interviews were very diverse ranging from the workplaces of my interviewees (which was the case for six of the interviews) to their homes (2), to restaurants or cafés (2) and also to a park (1). Including those who participated in the group interviews I interviewed a total of six men and ten women. The two youngest interviewees were Dylan, aged 17, and Matthew, aged 27. The others were between 32 and 85 years old with the majority of them (12 out of 16) in their forties to sixties. All interviews except one were recorded using my mobile phone and later transcribed. All accounts of participant observation and informal conversations were documented in the form of field notes during or after each of these accounts. In order to ensure my informants' anonymity all the names appearing in this thesis have been changed. Other essential information, such as age or profession, has been preserved.

4.3.1. Research Locations

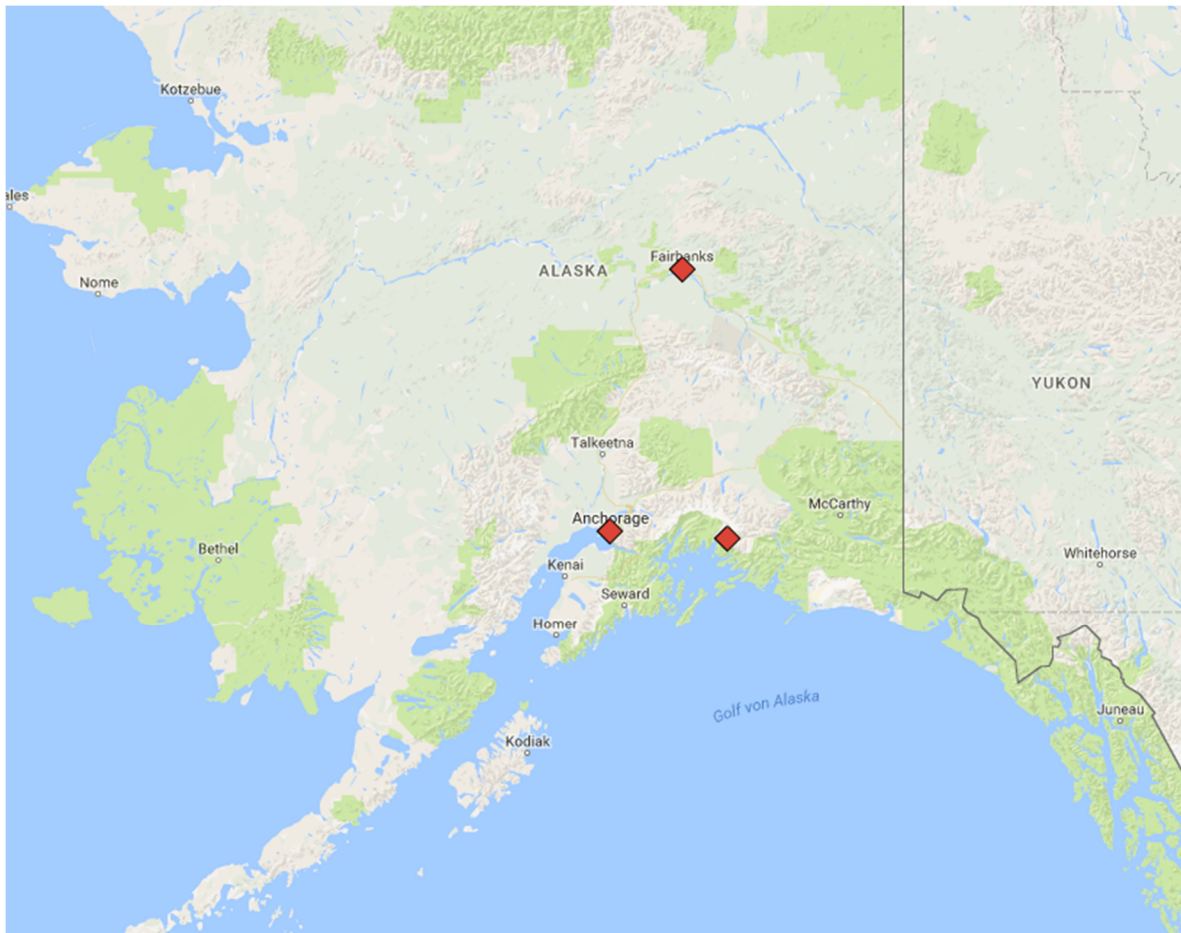


Figure 6: Map of Research Locations (screenshot taken by the author, June 2016, URL: goo.gl/S3sVhy)

The main area of my research were cities in a relatively small area of Alaska that is densely populated (in comparison to the rest of the state) with my main focus being on the Jewish communities of Anchorage, the only place in Alaska with two synagogues and a *mikvah*. I also did research in Fairbanks, Alaska's second-biggest city, which is just below the Arctic Circle and is home to the world's northernmost synagogue. Finally, by coincidence, I found one of just a handful of Jewish people living in Valdez whom I interviewed.

5. Jewish Dimension: Identity and Religion

In this first chapter on my empirical findings, I will discuss and analyze in-depth the topic of Jewish identity and link it with the results of my field work to illustrate what Jewish people in Alaska associate with Jewry. This will include a portrayal of what being Jewish means to them, as well as an examination of their individual construction of Jewish identity and how the expression of religion plays into this particular construction. I would like to begin this chapter with the following quote from one of my interviewees, who described the different variations that Jewish identity can take:

There are some different orientations, there are some people who maybe practice the religion but don't know that much about the culture or the history, I'm very interested in the culture and the history and not so big on the religion. Some people maybe like the food (laughs), and I'm also interested in the languages. There are all these different aspects (...). (Lloyd, Interview 7)

As becomes evident, when reading this quote, to fully assess Jewish identity is not an easy task. The form that one's Jewish identity can take is individual and unique; its definition is not static and clear-cut but rather multi-dimensional, dynamic and complex. This complex nature of Jewish identity is also addressed by Philip Wexler (2012: 74), who summarized: "To examine the meaning of Jewish collective identity would require nothing less than a history of civilization". This is also due to the fact that Judaism is the oldest of the three monotheistic religions and the one that is probably most known for its diaspora, with members of the religion being spread all across the globe due to their long history of persecution and displacement. Wexler also underlines the important characteristic of contemporary times, that is, the state of limbo many people find themselves in – caught in somewhat of an identity crisis between "collective and individualistic poles" (ibid.: 75). He claims that after individualism experienced its peak, social membership and collectivism are on the rise again and states that, in particular when one speaks of Jewish collective identity, one also has to consider a potential defensive character behind this collective identity.¹²

Relating to the different facets of Jewish identity as pointed out by my informant Lloyd, Herbert Gans developed the concept of 'symbolic ethnicity' to address specifically the changes in Jewish identity for the grandchildren of immigrants. In his article, Gans (1979)

¹² This will be further discussed in chapter 8.

describes the differences between the first and second generations of Jewish people (from Europe and Russia) in the United States and the third generation, the grandchildren of said former immigrants. Gans' hypothesis is that within this third generation people are generally less interested in their ethnic cultures and organizations (both sacred and secular) and instead more interested in maintaining their ethnic identity – the feeling of being Jewish and finding ways of doing so in easy and suitable ways. According to Gans there are several ways to do so: identity can be expressed through actions or feelings likewise. Exact ways to do so are to join certain organizations by being a synagogue member, by raising awareness about a specific topic, or simply by identifying with Jewish liberal politics or, as Lloyd stated, simply by choosing the aspect one finds the most interesting about Jewry – be it Hebrew or Yiddish, or even the food. While the grandparents and parents of this third generation had specifically assigned roles to fulfil and an anchored ethnicity, this third generation did not and thus could no longer take their identity for granted. Most of the members of this third generation, depending on the degree of their assimilation, “look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity, for ways that do not conflict with other ways of life” (ibid.: 8), leading them to refrain from any practice that is deemed too time consuming or committing (like a required active membership at an organization or synagogue). And since these people are interested in maintaining their identity rather than in particular group cultural practices, they are often developing individualized ways of expressing their Jewish identity. Any way of expressing one's identity is legitimate – as long as it fulfills the task of enhancing one's experience of identity. This kind of individual and highly diverse expression of Jewish identity within the third generation is expressive rather than fulfilling an instrumental function, with less impact on people's families or earning money and more relevance in their leisure time. For this new form of seeking, expressing and maintaining identity, Gans uses the term ‘symbolic ethnicity’, as it is often supported by the use of symbols that are taken from the traditional culture but then abstracted and used in new ways. (ibid.: 7ff.)

Primarily, Gans suggests, is symbolic ethnicity “characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior” (ibid.: 9). The symbols used must be clear in meaning to the other members of this third generation as well as “easily expressed and felt, without requiring undue interference in other aspects of life” (ibid.). Two important examples of such symbolic rites de passage that were abstracted

from the traditional religion and given greater importance are *bar/bat mitzvah*¹³ and *Hanukkah*¹⁴. *Hanukkah* is actually one of the minor Jewish holidays that has taken on whole new levels of popularity in the United States, partly because it impresses children. Rites de passage as well as holidays are ceremonial and therefore symbolic per se – they also do not take much time, do not interfere with one’s everyday routine and they serve well for bringing together the whole family every once in a while. (ibid.: 9f.)

In order to further discuss and analyze the specific forms of Jewish identity also requires a discussion of the terms used in this context and the challenge of positioning Jewish identity on the spectrum of ethnicity/culture and religion, which will be handled in the following two subchapters.

5.1. Jewishness, Jewry, Judaism

More than with other religions Judaism/Jewry has always been subject to the debate of whether it is a religion or rather an ethnic identity. Vivian Klaff, without much ado, simply writes: “In Jewish history it has been generally accepted that Judaism, the religion, and being Jewish in ethnic or cultural terms have been interdependent” (Klaff 2006: 416). With this Klaff states clearly that to make a distinction between the two represents a challenge. To identify oneself as being Jewish via the commitment to the religious Jewish practice “is the most durable core of Jewish tribal identity” (ibid.); however one needs to ask what happens when Jewish people are in a different environment and thereby suddenly free to practice their religion (in case it was oppressed in their former environment) and to choose whether to practice their religion at all. (ibid.) Nathan Glazer addresses this complex topic by using two distinct terms for different kinds of Jewish identity: ‘Jewishness’ (or Jewry) and Judaism. In 1957 he wrote that the Jewish community’s “focus would not be religion but something we may call ‘Jewishness’, which would be the common element in a variety of activities – religious, political, cultural, intellectual, philanthropic, all of them legitimately Jewish” (Glazer 1957: 91). In an article he wrote in 1990 entitled “American Jewry or American Judaism?”, Glazer brings yet another term into the discourse: ‘Jewry’. He uses the term

¹³ *Bar* and *bat mitzvah* are Jewish coming-of-age rituals for boys aged 13 and girls aged 12.

¹⁴ *Hanukkah* is a yearly holiday in winter lasting eight days. Its purpose is to commemorate the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

‘Jewry’ to refer to “the total body of American Jews and everything they do and stand for” (Glazer 1990: 14). By ‘Judaism’, however, Glazer means “the religion of the Jews, not just any religion that Jews, defined by descent, practice but a historical complex, one that has evolved and become different things at different times and that is still evolving (...)” (ibid.). According to Glazer, ‘Jewishness’, as opposed to ‘Jewry’, “suggests (...) some connection with a distinctive Jewish past, a culture, some involvement in activities with a specific Jewish component, social, cultural, political, or religious” (ibid.).

This differentiation of the terms Jewishness, Jewry and Judaism already includes an introduction to the question of whether Jewish identity is to be categorized as a religious or a cultural/ethnic identity. In order to attempt this positioning of Jewish identity in the case of the Alaskan Jewish communities, it is essential to underline the distinctiveness of this example, as Alaska is not only a remote place but also the world’s largest semi-enclave – namely a semi-enclave of the United States of America. These two factors combined create a very specific condition for the Jewish communities living there as Alaska is to be understood as a part of the United States, all the while being geographically far away from the rest of the states belonging to the United States of America. Nonetheless, Alaskan Jewry can and must in part be seen through the term ‘American Jewry’.

5.2. American Jewry

*“They always point at me and say: this is the example,
this is the new Jewish, this is the American Jewish.”*

(Matthew, Interview 13)

My interviewee Matthew told me this in reference to his many (and quite large) tattoos, which are well visible in spite of any clothes he may be wearing, adding that he does not like it, but he laughs it off nevertheless. This quote shows quite well that some people associate ‘American Jewish’ with assimilation to mainstream culture and the breaking of religious rules or traditions, perhaps even an ignorance of Judaism as a religion. What is especially interesting regarding this association is that Matthew is one of the most religious Jews I have talked to during my time in Alaska, if not the most religious. He wears his *kippah* wherever

he goes, every day of the week, keeps *kosher* in some regards and prays regularly. Yet, his body is almost completely covered in tattoos and he has a septum piercing. In my eyes this is simply a unique expression of an individual's understanding of religion and of life in general and not per se a negation of religion as such. It merely shows that there are many Jewish identities in the United States and the world, individualized forms of religious and cultural practice.

According to Friedlander et al. (2010: 346), American Judaism is to be regarded as a “civil religion, which is primarily secular and ethnic”. As said in their psychological study on American Jewish identity:

Contemporary North American Jews have a unique identity, both religious and cultural. To describe Jews as simply a religious minority omits what, for most individuals, is the more relevant aspect of their identity: a feeling of belonging to a specific ethnic group that crosses national borders and is instead tied to history, tradition, and ancestry. (ibid.: 345)

Furthermore, they add that Jewish people in the United States are not a visible minority with most of them being white and that they “have not suffered educational or economic disadvantage”. (ibid.) This, however, I do not find to be entirely true, as some have distinct surnames that might be assumed to be ‘Jewish’ by others and, as one of my interviewees told me, many changed their surnames upon emigrating to the United States so that they could blend in more easily. Friedlander et al. go on to clarify, that “despite assimilation and lack of political oppression, many American Jews do not identify themselves publicly, feel alienated from mainstream culture, and have internalized anti-Semitism” (ibid.). According to them, it is “widely acknowledged that most American Jews self-identify as Jewish culturally but not religiously (...)” (ibid.). Vivian Klaff summarizes this by saying “The classical ‘religious’ connotation of what it means to ‘be Jewish’ has over time developed into a discussion about the distinction between religion and ethnicity” (Klaff 2006: 416). Several factors are crucial for the strengthening of American Jewish identity, as for example the Holocaust, the founding of the state of Israel and the persistent threat to its survival – which makes “the experience of being Jewish (...) complex, highly personal, and fluid over a lifetime” (Friedlander et al 2010: 346).

This aspect of contemporary Jews in America leaning more towards identifying culturally but not religiously with Judaism is defined slightly differently by Shaul Magid (2015: 104), who describes it as follows:

Many American Jews have rediscovered Judaism not as a return to an old-style ethnocentric religion (...) but more in line with a globalized humanitarian ethos. (...) Judaism is not solely the glue that solidifies one's ethnic identity but also, and perhaps most prominently, a resource for contributing to global issues that concern Jews and that they wish to address as Jews.

He adds that these Jews do not seek a return to conventional, traditional Judaism, but rather “an adaptation of Judaism to construct meaning in a community whose ethnic parameters are being revised” (ibid.), they no longer need being Jewish as “a source of solidarity in a hostile environment” (ibid.), at least not in the way that their parents or grandparents did. Magid states that, in fact, being Jewish in America is not so different from belonging to any other minority in America:

For many minority cultures in contemporary America, the individual can think and act globally yet remain part of a particular collective. The expression of collective identity no longer serves exclusively, or even primarily, as a way of preserving group distinctiveness, as much as it serves one's own spiritual journey and, increasingly, contributes to the greater universal good. (ibid.)

Another important factor to take into consideration when writing specifically about American Jewry is a growing multi-ethnicity. As Magid (ibid.: 105) writes, an increasing number of Jewish people in America are marrying partners who are not Jewish, and thus many American Jewish families now have multiple narratives and histories contributing to their identity. In what he calls the ‘disassimilating phase’ the Jewish partner in such intermarried couples no longer necessarily feels the need to abandon their Jewish identity but instead returns to Judaism together with the non-Jewish partner, who is increasingly integrated into the Jewish congregation. Also, a growing number of converts have become active members in congregations, which also adds to the diversity among the congregation's members and asks for a change in the way Jewish identity is addressed.

In accordance with the views presented in this last subchapter, in particular those of Glazer (1957; 1990) and Gans (1979), it became very clear in almost all of the interviews I conducted that Jewish Alaskans first and foremost experience their being Jewish as cultural and not necessarily as religious. Even Rabbi Mitchell and his colleague Rebecca of the congregation

Beth Sholom in Anchorage agreed that they “operate like a community center first” (Rebecca, Interview 2). This to me is a crucial statement as it shows that even within the distinctly religious institutions there is an aim to primarily address the cultural component of the congregants’ identities and to focus on Judaism as a culture, not as a religion. This statement by the two persons responsible for Alaska’s biggest Jewish congregation is in concert with the majority of my interviewees as well as with the findings of numerous studies on this subject, as already shown in the chapter 2.6 where I presented recent findings that Judaism has undergone a transformation from being primarily a religion to being primarily an ethnicity and culture. (Friedlander et al 2010)

As already introduced before, one of the most religiously Jewish people I interviewed was a congregant from Beth Sholom in Anchorage called Matthew, who is 27 years old and a convert, because only his father was Jewish¹⁵. Even Matthew, for whom Judaism has become a thoroughly religious practice and expression of his identity, underlined this aspect of Jewry being primarily a culture when telling me about a trip to Israel during which he met other Jewish people from the United States and who were around his age: “(...) but what makes sense to me now after this trip and after meeting all these wonderful people from around the US that are my age and are Jewish and seeing how their lives are, where they're from, ... and how we're all still the same because we share this beautiful culture” (Matthew, Interview 13). The main element for him, despite his strong sense of religiosity, is that Jewry is a culture and as such a unifying, connecting element between him and other people with a similar background. His cultural background is very diverse, his father’s family being Moroccan, Ethiopian and Brazilian, and his mother’s family being Hungarian and French-Canadian. This diversity within his family and his inability to answer the question “Where are you from?” has led him to believe that he should be leading a more unique lifestyle rather than the ‘normal American one’:

So I’m all these different cultures that one would think 'Wow he must have had a very diverse upbringing' but it was a pretty normal American upbringing and lifestyle. But I've always wanted more because of how unique I was, I always thought of myself as this unique person, you know.. (...) I thought like 'I'm different, so why am I living the same lifestyle?'. (Matthew, Interview 13)

¹⁵ As Judaism is a matrilineal religion, one needs to have a Jewish mother in order to be considered Jewish.

The sensation of being different is also a source of discomfort and anxiety for Matthew, as will be presented in chapter 6.1. He decided to convert to Judaism partly because it offered a meaningful way of defining this sensation of being different and transforming his experience of being different (with a negative connotation) to being special (with a positive connotation). Experiencing being Jewish as unifying and connecting with people having similar backgrounds can simultaneously mean that it leads to a certain process of disconnecting from people who are not Jewish. This was described by artist Mary who is based in Anchorage, she was originally from Switzerland and converted to Judaism many decades ago. For her, it is mainly about being different: “I like the philosophy of it. I like the bringing up children in a different way. So there is a big cultural difference” (Mary, Interview 12). Earlier in the interview Mary said that people sometimes tell her she is not really Jewish because she converted, to which she replies that Hitler would not have cared about that, she would still have been classified and persecuted as a Jew. “I’m extremely loyal: if something would happen... I also know that I feel very comfortable with Jewish people, very comfortable. I’m different, I let my hair down. I have certain things in common. There is a base somehow. (...)” (Mary, Interview 12). For her, being Jewish has become a way of expressing that she is different from others but also that she has finally found a group of people she feels she belongs to, and this to an extent that she wants to remain loyal to the Jewish community and be a part of the group, even if something were to happen. Significant for this example is that even Jewish converts can develop an identity which implies that Jewish is primarily cultural, even in cases like the one where the converted person has had no prior familial ties with Judaism (such as through her father, for example). In both of these examples becoming Jewish offered an escape from mainstream culture and lifestyle and enabled these individuals to express something they felt was unique or different about them. As such, Jewish identity could also be described as an outlet, a form of expression of individuality. Regarding these examples, something that needs to be considered is that this might only be the case in areas with a lower Jewish population, as only then will being Jewish also mean being different from the majority of others.

As many of the more religiously practicing people I interviewed were converts, it can be said that many who feel a natural connection to Jewry do not feel that it is necessary to express their Jewish identity in the religious sense as they do not need the religious aspect to identify as Jewish. Lloyd described this phenomenon as follows: “(...) And the ones who convert then they have to practice the religion, because they can’t exactly convert to a new ethnic group.”

What Lloyd underlines here is that those deciding to become Jewish can only do so by committing to Judaism as the religious practice, as it is impossible to convert to an ethnic group. Even when fully committed to the religious practices that Judaism entails converts are not always accepted as ‘fully Jewish’. The number of converts I encountered in Alaska and their stories, however, suggest that Alaska is more accepting of different forms of (Jewish) identity, which could be attributed to the high degree of diversity among Alaskans.

Lloyd and Milton, both linguistics professors, focused on a different aspect as “Jewish”: on dealing with minorities and endangered languages. “My interest has always been in minority and endangered languages and I guess that’s a Jew natural sense of the importance of language and the identity on one hand and minority issues on the other hand, so it’s a somewhat natural thing (...)” (Milton, Interview 6). In this statement he is subtly expressing that Jewish people per se know what it is to be a minority and to speak an endangered language¹⁶ and due to this fact Jewish people supposedly have a natural understanding of the importance of protecting minorities and endangered languages. Lloyd, who worked with Milton, said something similar: “Yeah, and of course you could say that it relates to Jewish culture working with minorities’ peoples and oppression and so forth. That’s been said before (...)” (Lloyd, Interview 7). It is striking how in both of these statements it is regarded as something initial to Jewish culture to be concerned about minorities, oppression and persecution as well as the effects of these, to an extent that leads me to assume that this is what Milton and Lloyd primarily associate with Judaism: a people that was persecuted, that was a minority and that experienced the loss of culture and of language due to that – and that therefore unquestionably not only understands the issues other minorities face but is also more interested in them than perhaps other people who do not know the experience of belonging to an endangered minority. And Lloyd’s postscript “that’s been said before” suggests that he is aware that many other people share this perspective. This represents an example of Gans’ approach to Jewish identity, as presented at the beginning of this chapter: for Milton and Lloyd, dealing with endangered languages and protecting minorities becomes an “easy and intermittent” (Gans 1979: 8) way of expressing their Jewish identities without having to alter their daily lives too much. Focusing on an issue that is important to them personally, and choosing to express their Jewish identity through this specific issue enables

¹⁶ Yiddish was spoken by an estimated 10-12 million people before the Holocaust, in 1987 an estimated 2 million people still spoke it (Davis 1987: 159) and in recent decades the number has declined further.

them to incorporate their Jewish identity into their lives while avoiding conflicts with their general routines.

Now I will turn to a certain connection to other Jewish people that was described to me by some of my informants. As Lloyd stated later in the same interview, he is familiar with a connection that arises just from being Jewish and from knowing someone else who is also Jewish:

It's a sort of connection. When people ask about that, I say well we are connected. It doesn't mean you like the other people, it may mean you dislike them (laughs) (...) most people, if you have that identity you feel some connection, there's some common element, whether you like them or want to be with them is a whole other issue. (Lloyd, Interview 7)

In this quote Lloyd expresses very clearly this distinct kind of connection that many Jewish people I spoke to have also expressed in similar ways. In chapter 2.1 I elaborated on the views of Stuart Hall and the importance he places on the recognition of a “common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group” (Hall 1996: 2) for the process of identifying. Lloyd addresses an important point here, namely that the existence and awareness of such a connection do not necessarily mean that this connection leads to entirely positive interactions and experiences – in many instances the opposite might be the case – but the existence of a particular connection among people who are Jewish is undoubted and perhaps also unprecedented.

Another interesting aspect in this regard is that most people I interviewed stated that it was of no importance to them when moving to Alaska to know there would be a Jewish community here, and yet many ended up searching for other people who are Jewish and members of the local congregations, at least for some time. A Jewish man from California who spends his summers working in Valdez in a shop, said: “It’s not important to know there is a synagogue wherever I go, but I like knowing, when there's Jews there, makes me happy, makes me feel good” (Eleanor, Interview 9). This coincides with many of my interviewees’ points of view; while they did not necessarily move to Alaska under the precondition that there would be other Jewish people, most of them still felt happy, when they found out there was a congregation to go to or at least some other Jewish people to share holidays with. Also, because the Jewish congregations of Alaska are all fairly young, for many of my interviewees there were no actual Jewish congregations to come to or at least only relatively small ones as most of them only started to grow and develop within the past two decades. In contrast to the

majority of my interviewees, there was also one woman who originally came from Miami, Florida and told me the following: “I got into town on a Friday, August 4th, 1980, I drove into town and hadn’t seen my husband for a month, I said 'hello, give me a phone book' and the first thing I did was to go and find the synagogue for *Shabbat* services...” (Sharon, Interview 8). This is one of the very few examples where finding a Jewish congregation in Alaska was the main priority upon moving there. The majority of my interviewees were not concerned with whether there would be other Jewish people there or not but many of them still were content to eventually find there were others to share certain activities with.

After this first introduction into the different dimensions that being Jewish can have I will now go further into depth of the more specific aspects of being Jewish. At the base of any in-depth analysis of Jewry is Judaism as a religion. In my first subchapter of the empirical part I will therefore present the results concerning the degree of religiosity of my informants.

5.3. Religiosity

In the following subchapter I will present the findings concerning my informants’ religious practices and examine the relation of religiosity and Jewish identity in areas with a low Jewish population. The main topic of my master thesis is not Jewish identity in general, or even American Jewish identity – both of which have been addressed in numerous examples of academic literature (Alper/Olson 2011; Brink-Danan 2008; Bronner 2008; Cohen 2010; Kaplan 2009; Sarna 2004; Saxe 2014; Sheskin 2004) – but in fact a very small number of people who self-identify as Jewish and live in remote areas, foremost in the United States’ north-west corner, the world’s largest semi-enclave, Alaska. There is very little literature on Jewish identity in remote areas or, to be more precise, the effects that remoteness might have on one’s experience of Jewish identity and how it is maintained. One article that deals with the interplay of remoteness and Jewish identity, though focused on religiosity, is “Religious Population Share and Religious Identity Salience: Is Jewish Identity More Important to Jews in Less Jewish Areas?”. One of the authors had lived in an area with many other Jewish people and Jewish institutions and she had taken her Jewish identity for granted; when she moved to an area with a much smaller Jewish population, she suddenly found “that her Jewish identity has taken on a new level of personal meaning and importance in her life”

(Alper/Olson 2013: 82). This personal experience was the foundation of the article, the goal of the article to try and understand the deeper meaning of this experience. (ibid.)

Several studies (e.g. Olson 2008; Stark/Finke 2000; Stark 1998) have been undertaken in order to find out the correlation between religious commitment and the population concentration of this specific religious group, with the general finding that, contrary to some peoples' expectations, religious commitment tends indeed to be higher when the population concentration of a certain religious group is lower, which means that for example the rates of attendance at the synagogue are higher in such a case. However, interestingly enough, Alper and Olson suggest the contrary, namely that Jewish people tend to be more committed to their religious practice, when surrounded by many other Jewish people. It is important to note, however, that these opposing conclusions do not represent a contradiction per se. The author did not become more religiously active after moving to a "less-Jewish" area, but she did place more importance and significance on her Jewish identity while still remaining a rather secular Jewish person. Therefore, while the actual carrying-out of religiously motivated acts (such as attending a service at the synagogue) can sometimes decrease when surrounded by less Jews, the religious identity salience tends to increase under such circumstances. (ibid.: 83) Religious identity salience is described by Hoge and de Zulueta "as the self-described importance of religion to an individual" (Hoge/ de Zulueta 1984: 23), which refers more to the overall religious identity and not only the practiced religion.

These different theories on the effects of areas with a lower Jewish population show that living in remote areas can enhance a person's need of expressing their Jewish identity. Not just religious identity salience seems to be higher due to the environment being less-Jewish, but to a certain extent also religious practice overall. Data on the homepage of Alaska's biggest and oldest Jewish congregation 'Beth Sholom' suggests that the percentages of Jewish people belonging to a synagogue, lighting the *Shabbat* candles and observing *Hanukkah* are higher in Alaska than in the rest of the United States. (Frozen Chosen) However, while living in a remote area may lead people to reflect more on their Jewish identity and the way they want to (or even can, in such areas) express it, it does not necessarily mean that people also 'become more Jewish' in a strict, religious sense, following the *mitzvot*¹⁷. Concerning the example of Alaska, this issue has to be addressed considering

¹⁷ The 613 commandments contained in the *Torah*.

Alaska's particular geographic location and climate, as many of the *mitzvot* could not even be followed even if people had the wish and will to do so.

5.3.1. Attendance

Mitchell, rabbi of Alaska's biggest congregation, stated that they get most attendants for services on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, both of these services belonging to *Shabbat* – on Friday nights there are usually about twenty to thirty people, on Saturday mornings usually about ten – claiming that this “is pretty comparable to other congregations percentage-wise..” (Mitchell, Interview 3). Most attendants come for important events regarding the life-cycle, like *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvahs* and wedding ceremonies as well as the higher holidays such as *Pesach* or Passover¹⁸, where almost two hundred attendants came to the synagogue in 2015.

Brenda, the administrator of Fairbank's synagogue 'Or Hatzafon', told me that even in the tri-cities area¹⁹ the attendance rate is not higher for *Shabbat* services than in Fairbanks. “Look at our community... it's changed. It's changing all over the place, not just us. Down in the tri-cities it's a pretty big place, they didn't get any more people than we do on a Friday night. You'd think it's population-based. It's not!” When analyzing the attendance rates in relation to the entire population of that respective city or state, they come out even higher in Alaska than in most other US States, which also concurs with the data I presented in the beginning of this chapter on Alaskan Jews being more religiously active than Jews in other American States with higher rates of celebrating *Hanukkah*, being a congregation member and lighting the *Shabbat* candles.

¹⁸ *Pesach* or Passover is a celebration in spring to commemorate the Jews' escape from slavery in Egypt.

¹⁹ An area consisting of three neighboring cities in the southeastern part of the US state of Washington.

5.3.2. Keeping *kosher*

Adjusting one's dietary plan to fit the rules of keeping *kosher* is nearly impossible when living in Alaska. Rebecca, from the congregation Beth Sholom, estimated the number of families keeping *kosher* in the entire state at twenty, and this is just for families considering themselves as keeping *kosher*, which does not even mean that they truly are sticking to the rules of keeping *kosher*. There is no *kosher* butcher in Alaska and only fairly recently have big grocery store chains incorporated *kosher* shelves sometimes offering a small selection of *kosher* meat in their stores in Alaska. While there is *halal* meat for the Muslim communities, there is no *kosher* meat for the Jewish communities because *kosher* meat is subject to a much higher number of rules concerning the process of its production. Furthermore, raising cattle in Alaska with the aim of producing *kosher* meat would not be economical, according to Rebecca. As most of Jewish Alaskans are not Orthodox, many people usually just switch to vegetarian food for the higher holidays and don't keep *kosher* the rest of the time. Only within the Orthodox congregation by the Chabad movement is it necessary to have *kosher* meat, at least sometimes, so the rabbi has *kosher* meat flown in from the 'lower 48'. One woman even goes to Seattle herself on a regular basis in order to take back suitcases filled with frozen *kosher* meat. The majority of my informants at least try to keep *kosher* for the higher holidays, such as *Pesach* or *Rosh Hashanah* – to the extent that this is possible in Alaska. For most, this means to at least refrain from eating meat that is not *kosher*, and therefore, as pointed out above, most switch to vegetarian food for these specific days.

An important point when writing about *kosher* rules is that *kosher* is by no means a fixed definition of what can and what cannot be eaten. A *kosher* lifestyle is subject to each individual's interpretation of the words in the *Torah* and the differences between these interpretations are vast. The sentence "do not cook a kid in its mother's milk" (Torah 2016) has generally be translated as not to mix dairy and meat products. For some, this has taken to mean that, after having had meat, one should wait at least six hours before consuming dairy products (and vice versa). For others, it simply means not to consume the two categories of food within one dish – like in Spaghetti Carbonara for example. And for others, and this is probably true for the majority of Jewish people in the world right now, it means to only follow this rule on important holidays. One such individual interpretation of keeping *kosher* was explained to me by Harriet, one of very few Jewish people in Valdez, Alaska. She told me:

I know I'm Jewish, that's good enough. And I think from my mother, I respected her, I don't eat pork. If there was like a... a shul²⁰ around here, I would go. But there isn't. That's life. But in my own way, that's how I do it. I don't eat pork. That's good enough. (Harriet, Interview 10)

Another example is that of Matthew, who was perhaps the strictest individual I met, when it comes to keeping *kosher*: “I don't eat pork, I don't eat shellfish. I don't mix beef and dairy. I do mix chicken and dairy. I only eat *kosher* beef, but with chicken I don't care whether it's *kosher* or not. That's where I'm at with that” (Matthew, Interview 13). In this quote, Matthew also refers to the rules of *kosher* meat in general, meaning that it was raised and then slaughtered in a specific way that is considered *kosher* and that was also supervised by someone with the right training in *kosher* slaughter. For him, it is important to stick to the general rule that pork is not considered *kosher* at any time and neither is shellfish. For other types of meat that come from generally *kosher* animals, it is only important to him in some regards that the animal was also raised and slaughtered in a *kosher* way. The most memorable individualized form of keeping *kosher* came from Reform Rabbi Mitchell, who told me that since there's no *kosher* butcher around, he prefers to go hunting himself because then he can ensure that the animal is treated respectfully. He does not hunt often, but when he does, the meat will suffice for a long period of time because he does not eat much meat. Practices such as hunting or fishing have a long tradition in Alaska and are common practice among a diverse and wide range of people. They fall under the category of self-subsistence and are legitimate ways of obtaining food, especially because there is a large number of wild animals living close to the Alaskan people – this way of obtaining food is therefore easily accessible to anyone. While a rabbi carrying out such practices may be perceived as irregular by people (especially those who are Jewish) in most other regions of the world, in Alaska this is to be understood as ordinary. This is an example of a distinct Alaskan Jewish identity where elements from both influences have formed certain new habits that then help maintain both, the Alaskan and the Jewish identity.

²⁰ The Yiddish expression for 'synagogue'.



Figure 7: *Kosher Hot Dogs* (Photo taken by the author, Fairbanks, May 2015)

5.3.3. *Mikvah*

The *mikvah* is a ritual bath for Jewish people, and observant Jewish women are expected to immerse themselves in this ritual bath every month after their period to cleanse themselves. There used to be a *mikvah* in Anchorage at Elmendorf Air Force Base, which was built in 1974 for the wife of an Orthodox Air Force chaplain. It remained open for a long time but was in a horrible condition by the early 1990s, when the Jewish population of Alaska continued to expand. About a handful of Alaskan women were observant enough to fly to Seattle monthly for the use of a proper *mikvah* in good shape. Although natural waters like rivers, oceans and lakes can also serve as *mikvahs*, these women went to Seattle every month after having had several encounters with moose bathing in these lakes at the same time. By the end of the 1990s the Air Force *mikvah* was due for demolition, and the Greenberg family managed to lead a successful fundraising campaign in order to finally build their own *mikvah*, which is now located close to the Jewish museum and the Chabad synagogue in Anchorage. (Fishkoff 2003: 139ff.) Brenda, who converted to Judaism after having moved to Alaska, had to use a *mikvah* in order to complete her conversion process and told me that they just used a pool filled with river water, because there is no *mikvah* in Fairbanks.

5.3.4. *Shabbat and other Holidays*

For most of my informants it was important to observe the major holidays of a Jewish year, even when they did not really consider themselves very religious. To these generally count *Pesach*, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*²¹, and *Hanukkah*. Surprisingly, I encountered many Jewish people who even try to observe *Shabbat* on a regular basis, if only by attending either Friday night or Saturday morning services at the nearest synagogue. For two of my interviewees *Shabbat* holds a special meaning. One of them is recent high school graduate Dylan, who was one of the teenagers from Fairbanks to join the group trip to Poland and Israel shortly before my arrival, along with other Alaskan Jewish teenagers. He told me about his search for a college and how one aspect he's looking at is the proximity of a synagogue to the campus:

²¹ The Day of Atonement; the holiest day in the year in Judaism. It is ten days after *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year Celebration.

Actually I'm looking into that when I'm looking at colleges, I don't want to go to a college that doesn't (...) have (...) a Reform synagogue that I can ride my bike to every week. I don't know what I'd do without my weekly service... just stress is gone after services. (Dylan, Interview 8)

For Dylan, *Shabbat* service has become a means to take his mind off other things and to relax, it has become a weekly ritual that is an important routine in his life, to an extent that he is planning his future around it because it provides security for him.

Similarly, for Matthew observing *Shabbat* is one of the things that he loves the most about being Jewish. For him, however, this does not mean attending *Shabbat* services but rather “to sit with like-minded people and have a meal with them and reflect” (Matthew, Interview 13). Although *Shabbat* usually takes about 24 hours, it is not always easy to incorporate that into one’s work-schedule and daily routine, but Matthew tries to “have at least a 12-hour frame in between that 24-hour frame” where he “can focus on Judaism” (Matthew, Interview 13). For him, it is also proven to be challenging to defend his wish of observing *Shabbat*, claiming that “Alaskans or Americans or just young kids don't understand that concept. Especially Friday night is a party night. They ask me 'Where were you on Friday night?' I have a bunch of friends who aren't Jewish, they kept asking me 'let's go out Friday, do this, do that' and I said 'I'm sorry guys, I can't'. It's never understood.” This concurs with the theory of the ‘odd man out’-effect by Alper & Olson.²² It involves a behavior that is unfamiliar to non-Jews and causes Jewish people to stand out and have to explain their behavior, which non-Jews often find odd. (Alper/Olson 2013: 86)

This phenomenon of seeming odd to others due to one’s religious practices is a source of frustration for Matthew, who even wrote a poem in order to make himself understood and vent his feelings:

*Matthew, what can be so important that you spend every Friday
of your young adult life at home?*

²² See chapter 6.2.2 for a detailed description of the ‘odd man out’-effect.

*Let me explain this to you because when I say on Friday night
after work I'm going home, I'm truly going home.
I'm stepping through the gateways under a mosaic of a Jerusalem skyline
and I whisper to myself 'next year in Jerusalem'
as I touch the mezuzah and I kiss my hand.
My favorite time of the week, the chance to sit back, unwind,
to forget about time, myself and my own problems.
To focus on this community as a whole,
you see it's a brief chance to escape and be part of something bigger,
but usually there'll be no more than 15 people in the synagogue
but they're all familiar faces who now recognize my face in return.
The same weekly routine always seems to surprise me somehow,
I know the order of our beautiful melodies we're going to pray,
the same prayers that my grandparents' grandparents prayed
and hearing these melodies so beautifully slipped past kosher lips
is enough to take my breath away.
So now you tell me who wouldn't want to leave home
on a Friday night like this, a heart overflown with bliss,
and a mind ready for any court balls thrown at me in the week to come.
So every Friday night, I'll be under this mosaic of Jerusalem,
maybe, just maybe next year in Jerusalem ...
b'ezrat haschem, next year in Jerusalem.
(Matthew, Interview 13)*

In this poem, Matthew also addresses this relaxing effect of *Shabbat*: that it offers the opportunity to sit back, unwind and to forget about other things occupying his mind, just as it does for Dylan. In these two very similar examples of the meaning of *Shabbat* for young Jewish men, it becomes clear that, although *Shabbat* does not have an extremely religious meaning for them, it has become a routine that gives security and provides them with what they need in order to unwind. In a way, religion in these two cases is more a means to achieve something else rather than that which needs to be achieved. It simply provides the frame in which the thinking of other things becomes less important and instead relaxation and reflection are actively enhanced, also through the presence of other Jewish people during *Shabbat* dinners or services.

This frame that religion provides in certain instances could also be observed concerning other Jewish holidays considering that many of my interviewees stated that observing the higher holidays mainly serves as a way of bringing the whole family together and enjoy a meal with them. A young woman from Philadelphia who comes to Valdez every summer to work there for a few months said she only misses being away from a Jewish community during the holidays: “I only miss it slightly when I’m somewhere and I know that my family is all together having *Seder*²³, then a little bit. But besides that I don’t really miss it” (Eleanor, Interview 9). As becomes clear in this quote, it is not the community or the holiday itself that she misses but the being around her family and celebrating *Pesach* together with them. Similarly, to these examples, Lloyd stated that even if one sometimes attends a congregation (Reform in this case), it is not necessarily in order to be religious:

For people who aren't Jewish it's hard for them to understand how in Reform Judaism you can be part of that and yet not really be very religious. It's a very strange thing. Catholicism, if you go to church you are very involved in it and the teachings of Catholicism. But for the Jews... you can do it for identity. (Lloyd, Interview 7)

Like with *Shabbat* and other specific holidays, even the simple act of attending a service at a congregation does not require a religious motivation but might simply provide the necessary space for maintaining one’s cultural identity. Again, religion is just the means of obtaining something else. This also leads to the next aspect that could very well be observed during my research, namely that for many constructing and maintaining their Jewish identity is primarily of importance when they have a family.

5.3.5. Family and Children

One aspect that kept on reappearing during the interviews I conducted, was the aspect of having children and how this affects someone’s understanding and also need for maintaining a Jewish identity. The awareness that one’s children will only acquire a Jewish identity of their own, when it is actively enhanced and thus maintained by their Jewish parent(s), was a

²³ *Seder* is the term used to describe the first two evenings of the *Pesach* celebration, usually marked by a family dinner following a specific order of different rituals.

crucial aspect in the maintaining of one's own Jewish identity for many of my interviewees. There were several cases in which my interviewees were not congregation members anymore but in fact had only been members of their respective synagogue in the time period when they had children to raise. One such example is Milton, who, when asked whether he followed the religious rules at all, said:

I very much did, before there was a synagogue even, I was observant, as I said, while I had young children, and I saw to it that all of the sons had *bar mitzvahs* and I had to train them for that, which is more than what most parents can do. (Milton, Interview 6)

He repeated several times throughout the interview how it was crucial to him to ensure that his children construct their own Jewish identity. This importance of being observant and passing it on to his children subsided once they had grown up. Also Lloyd, who is not an active congregation member anymore and does not consider himself a religious person, describes how his daughter had her *bat mitzvah* and how her devotion to this also made him very content: "My older daughter had her *bat mitzvah* and she found it very, very interesting. She really worked hard at it, which I don't know if that made her religious. But I was very happy because I want her to have an understanding of Judaism" (Lloyd, Interview 7). These examples imply that the main aim in the raising of children is then to pass on a certain sense of Jewish identity and of the according traditions, instead of relaying Judaism as a religious belief.

This phenomenon of people only being active members of their respective congregations as long as they have children to raise is also a source of discontent for those who remain active within their congregation even after their children are grown up: "What's happened with a lot of them is that their children grow up.. when they're little they want their children to have a Jewish home and then when they grow up.." (Brenda, Interview 8). This issue was especially present during the group interview with some of the congregants of the synagogue in Fairbanks, who expressed pride that they continued to stay active in the congregation even after their children had become adults.

6. Social Dimension: Jewish and non-Jewish people in Alaska

In this chapter I will deal with the interplay of Jewry and Alaska, or more explicitly the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish people living in Alaska, the diversity among Alaskan people and also anti-Semitism that Jewish people in Alaska have experienced.

6.1. Diversity

“When I asked people what they associated with Alaska, no one said diversity, and that’s one of the things we have here that we’re not known for.”

(Matthew, Interview 13)

This aspect of diversity, unlike Alaska’s nature, climate and space, is something that few non-Alaskans seem to know or associate with the place. Matthew informed me that East Anchorage High School is the most diverse school in the entire United States. Prior to Matthew’s first visit to the Beth Sholom congregation in Anchorage, he experienced fear of going in because all his life he had felt like an outsider:

(...) with me not knowing anything about the community up here other than my few Jewish friends I was just afraid they were gonna see me as some weirdo outsider.. I don't really look like them.. going in and seeing that it's even diverse in our congregation! You know you have me who is Moroccan-Ethiopian, some Sephardic people, Ashkenasis, Mali whose dad is Yemenite, you have all these different things. (Matthew, Interview 13)

Matthew generally described Alaska as very, very open because there are so many cultures. Lewis told me of a black man who had come up to Alaska in the army and has stayed ever since because he feels so much safer than in his home state Louisiana. This aspect was also addressed within the first few minutes of my first interview. Rebecca told me that “it’s very diverse, there are ninety different languages here. That helps” (Rebecca, Interview 1). With

this, she refers to the existing diversity being an important factor in making it easier for minorities because the sense of being part of a minority is something that many others will share and can thus relate to. Louise, the curator of the Jewish Museum in Anchorage, is also active in an organization called ‘BridgeBuilders’, which brings together the different cultures present in Alaska, encouraging them to celebrate these cultures and share them with others, through performances for example. These examples show that Alaska is experienced as a safe and diverse environment, in which there truly is space for everyone – regardless of their identity. The high degree of diversity seems to create an atmosphere where it is common to feel different and this ultimately encourages the members of different minorities to support one another and work together for initiatives that promote mutual understand like in the example of ‘BridgeBuilders’.

6.2. Jews and Others

In the following two subchapters I will elaborate on the results concerning the relations between Jewish Alaskans and their fellow non-Jewish neighbors. First, I want to give a general impression of these relations and how Jewish people living in Alaska perceive these relations. In a second step, I will then elaborate in a more in-depth manner on the experiences of my interviewees that they deemed worthy of telling when asked about anti-Semitism in Alaska. These both aspects are closely related, in fact anti-Semitism is yet another subcategory of the general relations between Jewish and non-Jewish people in Alaska. Before commencing on this topic it should be noted that it is a difficult task to speak of non-Jewish Alaskans in general, due to Alaska’s extremely high degree of diversity. So while there are many people in Alaska who are not Jewish, this by no means says that these can all be analyzed in the same manner as they belong to very different groups.

During my interviews I heard many remarks that gave clue on the sense of community and to what extent the Jewish community was embedded into Alaskan society as a whole. When I conducted the group interview with five women of the Beth Sholom congregation in Anchorage, most of the interview revolved around this community aspect. They told me that the synagogue is quite public, and all of them agreed that they generally feel safe, that they have the feeling that people watch out for them (even the FBI and the CIA). This issue was

the first one that was brought up at the beginning of the interview, and it became evident that all of these women had very strong feelings about this. In the course of this timeframe, many strong and poignant statements were made. They all were of the opinion that “there’s hate against natives, while as a Jewish person you can just blend right in” (Martha, Interview 1) and that “they’re much rather Jewish than black in this country” (Wanda, Interview 1). When telling me about an attack where teens drew the symbol of the swastika on the wall of the synagogue in the early 1990s, they said that many non-Jewish people showed up for the next *Shabbat* service to show support. Although all of them claimed to generally feel safe in Anchorage they also kept on giving statements that indicated that maybe they were just feeling safe because the situation was way worse for other minorities. The impression that the Jewish community might be the most accepted minority in Alaska or perhaps also in the United States does not change the fact that it is still a minority and often treated as such.

In spite of this awareness of a certain difference, of belonging to a religious minority and sometimes being reminded of that, there were also numerous examples of indeed very good relationships and mutual interest between different groups. Due to high intermarriage-rates²⁴, the congregations themselves are becoming more diverse and mixed and thus also more open. Rabbi Mitchell seeks to enhance these spaces of interaction and open dialogue and is glad whenever non-Jewish people attend events at his synagogue. One such example would be the *Pesach Seder* they hosted shortly before my time in Alaska in April 2015 where they had almost two hundred attendants, most of them non-Jewish. Another example is the yearly *mitzvah* mall, a social event they host every December seeking to encourage people to donate to nonprofit organizations with different causes; during the planning of this event they are in close contact with numerous nonprofit organizations dedicated to a range of issues and organized by people from all kinds of backgrounds. Matthew also told me about this during his interview:

The thing here is that they do a lot of events and get their name out there but at the same time it's not that present. They're helping out at a lot of events and stuff. But it's about the community as a whole, it's not to say 'Hey we're Jewish, we're here, we want you to know about us' but more like 'We're Alaskans, we can do this'. (Matthew, Interview 13)

²⁴ In this case, the term means the rate of marriages between Jewish and non-Jewish people. The term can be used to describe any kind of mixed marriage.

This quote expresses Matthew's interpretation of the congregation's actions as being more oriented towards the whole community and helping each other, rather than calling for attention and using it as a means to bring attention to Judaism – which also coincides with my interpretation of the congregation's aims. Indeed, the main goal in these planned events seemed to be to bring people together, regardless of their faith or origin.

6.2.1. “They’re basically the same” - Jewish-Muslim relations in Alaska

This diversity also has an especially crucial effect for Jewish-Muslim relations in Alaska, both of them sharing this minority status. One example was told to me by Matthew: he and some Israeli friends of his get together every Wednesday night to play soccer with some Palestinians, focusing on their similar role as a religious minority in Alaska and their similar region of origin, rather than their differences. They all play in one team against people from other regions, like Latin America, and refer to themselves as the Middle-Easterners. Many of them speak both Arabic and Hebrew and also teach each other parts of these languages. In this example the presence of all these different minorities has encouraged some to forget tensions many others feel, tensions that are on the news on an almost daily basis, and instead focus on what they have in common: the same area of origin and a passion for soccer.

In a similar manner Rabbi Mitchell also actively contributes to a strong relationship between the Jewish and the Muslim community in Anchorage, which he describes as ‘nice’. He holds frequent forums at the congregations in which people from the Jewish and the Muslim community come together. The format he describes as follows:

Nothing about Jewish traditions and Muslim traditions but talks about what it's like to be a minority in the United States. Cause that's the common ground and that's what we share. We can't do anything from Anchorage to solve the Middle-East problems. But we can make Anchorage a healthy viable community. And the only way we can do that is to share and share our experiences 'cause we find out 'Hey, they're basically the same' and that's what.... it was nice to see that. (Mitchell, Interview 3)

He added later that the Muslim community also invited him to the opening ceremony of Alaska's first mosque. This quote makes clear that to Mitchell it is important to underline the fact that both the Jewish and the Muslim communities are minorities and this common ground

of knowing what it's like to be a member of a religious minority in the United States is more important to him than the difference between their religion and their political views on the Middle-East. This implies that he is well aware of being a member of a minority and that there is in fact a common ground to be shared, a ground of experiences that he assumes other members of minorities might also have had – and not necessarily positive. Furthermore, this statement also shows clearly that he prioritizes, like Matthew and his friends, focusing on this similar status as being members of a religious minority in the United States rather than talking about each group's respective traditions and perhaps differences. In this, he sees importance in order to contribute to the state of community in Anchorage and he expresses this as if he feels it is partly his task to make a contribution to this, to ensure that there are good ties among members of the different minorities for a harmonious community overall.

6.2.2. Anti-Semitism

The topic of this subchapter is anti-Semitism and to what extent the experiences of Jewish people living in Alaska are shaped by it. Before the depiction of specific examples, I want to point out how living in areas with a low Jewish population density can present a particular form of challenge or even threat to Jewish identity. According to Alper and Olson, there are several dimensions to living in a very Jewish area. While high levels of Jewish religious practice and cultural involvement are not only possible but also encouraged simply by the presence of other Jewish people who carry out religious practices, the other side to this is that highly Jewish areas may create more space for Jewish people who want to be less Jewish. (Alper/Olson 2013: 85) In fact Glazer underlines this last aspect in his book 'American Judaism' and describes that: "It was in these almost totally Jewish areas, paradoxically, that Jews could live lives almost completely unaffected by Jewish religion and that the proportion of synagogue members was always lowest" (Glazer 1957: 117). And Jewish people living in such 'highly-Jewish' areas are also in less need of explaining or defending their Jewish identity, as suggested by Alper and Olson:

Unlike Jews in less Jewish areas, their Jewish identity may seldom be challenged or brought up as a relevant issue in their daily activities. They less often have to explain themselves to Jews or even non-Jews (who are themselves accustomed to encountering Jews on a regular basis). In short, they may less often have to think about their Jewish identity. (Alper/Olson 2013: 85)

Some general works address the issue of transforming from being a member of a majority religion to a member of a minority religion (Duderija 2007; Hashmi 2000; Herberg 1955), which often deal with the experiences of Muslims (Peek 2005; Ammerman 2003) who have emigrated to the Europe or the United States and therefore also suddenly find themselves with a minority status. Having such a status forces a person to account for their identity and this, in turn, increases the importance of said identity in this person's life. (Alper/Olson 2013: 85)

In addition, in less Jewish areas, and generally less populated/more remote areas, contact between different groups of people might increase. People are somewhat forced to have contact with people who are not members of their ethnic or religious group because there are not many people overall. This, in turn, may also enhance understanding but just as well misunderstanding, as people find themselves in need of explaining or justifying a certain behavior, such as the sticking to *kosher* dietary restrictions or keeping *Shabbat*. And in more remote areas, the general awareness and familiarity with other religious practices might not be as high as in more populated areas.

To the extent that they dress or act in ways that are distinctively Jewish and not familiar to the non-Jews living nearby, they may be subject to what we call the "odd man out" effect. That is, Jews in areas of low Jewish population share are forced to think about their identity more because they believe that others find them odd or actually treat them differently (ibid.: 86).

This is also taken up by the report "Geographic Differences among American Jews": "While maintaining Jewish identity and Jewish life present challenges for the Jewish communal system in all regions of the country, these challenges appear to be heightened outside the areas of traditional Jewish settlement, most notably the West and in small cities, towns and rural areas" (Sheskin 2004: 28f.). But it may be these challenges that Jews in more remote or less-Jewish areas are faced with that encourage them to place more importance on their Jewish identity, rather than forgetting about it or actively trying to assimilate.

After giving this brief overview of the specific challenges that come with living in areas with a low Jewish population density, I will now proceed with more precise statements on anti-Semitism in Alaska. This is to be seen as a subcategory of the code 'community' and it is generally hard to separate those two, but I still wanted to try and elaborate in more detail on

some statements that were made that refer to somewhat anti-Semitic behavior or could be interpreted as being motivated by a certain kind of insensitivity or even anti-Semitism. When asked to describe anti-Semitism in Alaska, Wanda made the very poignant statement that “it’s more like putting out fires, rather than fighting a growing cancer” (Wanda, Interview 1) suggesting that, while there are incidents every now and then, there is no institutionalized form of anti-Semitism that is increasing. Rabbi Mitchell made an attempt at describing the situation for the Jewish community as a whole, saying the following:

The Jewish communities tend to stay quiet, don’t want to make waves and if you stay quiet, then you sort of get accepted as “We have a lovely Jewish community” in town. If you make waves then you have an uppity Jewish community in town that is always complaining and that’s what Jews do. It’s a quick jump to the anti-Semitic stereotypes that exist. (Mitchell, Interview 3)

This quote includes a poignant point about the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish people living in Alaska. While generally it may seem like everything is at peace and that the different groups forming the overall community have a good relationship with each other, with this quote Mitchell shows that this does not necessarily mean that anti-Semitic sentiments are not there, are not lingering in the background just waiting for a trigger to come out. Mitchell seems to be convinced that people indeed have such opinions about the Jewish people in town but usually do not see any sense in expressing them unless they suddenly see reason to.

While investigating the nature of anti-Semitism experienced by Jewish people in Alaska it became evident that many of my interviewees were reluctant to categorize something as anti-Semitic and instead often used words such as ‘ignorant’ or ‘insensitive’ to describe what they had experienced. Although undoubtedly, they are able to live a good life in Alaska and feel like part of the community there are certain tensions that arise every now and then, and the fact that each and every one of my interviewees had at least one such story of an ‘ignorant’ person to tell changes the narrative, and this partly negates my interviewees’ perspective, which could be interpreted as being protective of Alaska. Noteworthy was also the process to my informants sharing negative experiences with me during the interviews. When asked about negative experiences, most of my informants began by saying that they had not had any. In the course of the interview, however, every one of them recalled an incident, and often a second or more experiences of negative experiences followed after the first. This also concurs with my interpretation of this protectiveness of Alaska. To conclude: while it is true

that most of the incidents I was told of could not be straightforwardly classified as an anti-Semitic hate crime it is still striking that a certain kind of ignorance or usage of hurtful expressions targeted at Jewish people seems to be so frequent that everyone can contribute an example to the discussion.

I encountered this kind of relativizing from the first day onwards, in fact in the first sentence in the first interview I conducted: “There’s no anti-Semitism here, there’s just no understanding” (Wanda, Interview 1). This can be seen as an extension of everything addressed in the last subchapter on the overall sense of community. While there might not be a very present and dangerous threat of anti-Semitic behavior in Alaska this still does not mean that Jewish people in Alaska feel exclusively well-treated, respected and understood. Many people certainly have good ties with non-Jewish people and their religion generally does not trigger a certain kind of mean behavior towards them but each and every one of the people I spoke with could tell me at least a few stories that might have been motivated by anti-Semitic sentiments or that at least were on the border to being classified as discrimination. Every congregation had experienced at least one ‘attack’ – be it the smearing of unambiguous symbols on their walls or odd phone calls.

Some of the incidents took place in high schools, such as the one experienced by Wanda’s daughter. She was the only Jewish kid in her high school class and was feeling ignored when all the children were making Christmas stockings in school for the holidays. Upon asking her teacher what she should do in the meantime, the teacher told her that she should just make a Christmas stocking in white, blue and gold – and that was that. A similar experience of lack of understanding within school was told to me by Dylan, a participant in the group of Alaskans teens who went to Poland and Israel shortly before my arrival. When his class read the novel ‘Night’ by Elie Wiesel, he brought the *Torah* to class because he thought it would be interesting for the others to look at but his English teacher told him he could not bring outside information. And then, at the point in the book where they’re saying the mourner’s *kaddish*²⁵, Dylan explained to everyone how important that is, and the teacher responded by saying: “Well I don’t know what that is, so I don’t think it’s important”. When asking him what he thought was behind these statements, he told me he thinks that she was just being ignorant. The narratives of such incidents display a wide variety with regard to their

²⁵ A specific prayer traditionally recited after a person’s death.

seriousness and harmfulness, and many, if not most, might certainly be accurately categorized as simply ignorant rather than hateful. But the question whether an ignorant, rather than a hateful remark, does not also classify as discriminative, or even as anti-Semitic, remains. The intention behind a certain remark is often unclear, but even if the nature of a certain action or remark remains unknown and is ultimately deemed as ‘merely ignorant’, it will most definitely contribute to a Jewish person feeling uncomfortable, in the best case, and in the worst case hurt and insecure, unsure about how to best respond as a result of the remark.

Another striking story, and perhaps the best example of the kind of discrimination that Jewish people sometimes face living in Alaska, was told to me by Matthew, who, as I described in the beginning of this subchapter, followed this procedure of only step-by-step allowing for negative experiences to come up during the interviews. He started by saying he had never had bad experiences, then conceded he had experienced it once:

I've only experienced anti-Semitism here one time, it was very brief and I don't even know if it was meant to be anti-Semitism or if it was just her being a jerk, I was walking into a store and I had my *yarmulke*²⁶ on, I didn't have a hat on that day and she was like driving, I think she was just waiting for me to walk by... so she leans out the window and she goes 'that's a stupid fucking hat'. I don't know if I would even categorize that as anti-Semitism, but it's still a hurtful thing like... I was like 'what was the need for that? You're in that much of a hurry that me and my stupid hat... so I think that's the only time I experienced anti-Semitism. (Matthew, Interview 13)

This story is a good example of Alper's and Olson's (2013) theory of the ‘odd man out’-effect described at the beginning of the chapter, where a specifically Jewish way to dress is perceived as unfamiliar or at least uncommon by a non-Jewish person, resulting in the Jewish person to be pointed out as odd. Shortly after telling me this story, Matthew recalled another instance that left him feeling uncomfortable:

There was one other time where... I was at the mall waiting in line to get food and there was this young kid, high school, he's on the phone with his friend who is in the mall somewhere else and he said 'Hey man, about to get my food, you owe me that money don't try to jew me out of it', he looked back at me and could tell that I was Jewish, and said 'Hey man, just get up here'. (Matthew, Interview 13)

In both of these examples, it was unclear to Matthew whether these remarks were anti-Semitically motivated, but regardless of the intention behind these examples, in both cases

²⁶ *Yarmulke* is a different term for *kippah*.

he ended up feeling hurt and confused. While the first example might just have been a result of a lack of knowledge about the kind of 'hat' Matthew was wearing and what it means, the second is a more difficult case because it refers directly to Jews. A very similar story was told to me by Lewis, a professor at the University of Fairbanks who addressed this difficulty of adequately categorizing some remarks. In the beginning of the interview he stated that he finds Alaska to be an exceptionally accepting place, at least socially, and that he has almost never encountered anti-Semitism in the many decades he has spent living there. He also added that there "certainly is no institutionalized anti-Semitism" in Alaska, also telling me about his parents' generation who still felt they should change their names to a name not ending with '-sky', which would lead others to make assumptions about their Jewish faith and Eastern European origin. Interestingly enough, in the course of the interview his narrative changed slightly and he ended up telling me that he had in fact made some negative experiences, although he would not classify them as anti-Semitic.

I can't say that I've had bad experiences because of anti-Semitism. Not really. I've had bad experiences... cultural miscommunication experiences which can be mistaken for anti-Semitism. I think some Jewish people use the accusation of anti-Semitism a little too easily and I think that's a bad thing. I've been in a couple of situations I can remember where there was an offense or something was said that was offensive, for example I'm sitting with someone from University discussing budgets, someone who is my superior, and we were talking about a budget and she said 'Maybe when you talk to them about the price you can try to jew them down'. So I was at a crossroads, I really liked this person... you know, what to do in that moment.. I just sort of flushed but then I thought this is a teaching moment, not an offensive moment and I told her 'Here's why that is offensive' and she was very... she said 'I didn't mean that, it was just an expression' and I said yeah, I know it's just an expression, but here's what it means and I think she'll probably never use it again. That's kind of a choice that you have in the moment, whether to be offended or use it as an opportunity to teach. (Lewis, Interview 5)

In the beginning of this quote Lewis explains that he thinks not everything interpreted as anti-Semitism is in fact meant in such a way and that many use the label 'anti-Semitic' too easily while he thinks many of those situations might actually be more accurately described as 'cultural miscommunications'. The story he then told me is ambiguous in that regard because it involved a superior co-worker of his who he usually really likes. It seemed authentic that Lewis really does not believe that this person's intention was to be anti-Semitic or that she even realized what she said could be interpreted in that way. This example is especially complex because the phrase used by said co-worker distinctly refers to Jews and furthermore to one of the oldest anti-Semitic stereotypes: that Jews have good ways of handling money and usually know how to gain as much as possible out of a situation. Nevertheless, Lewis

trusted his instinct and proved that sometimes the line between intentional anti-Semitism and unintentional miscommunication can be very fine and that the best way to handle a situation as complex as this is often to communicate openly. This also applies to Matthew's story and the remark 'don't try to jew me out of it'. Even if these people did not mean to repeat and reproduce anti-Semitic ideas, they unintentionally did so, and this shows that even in Alaska, some of these ideas are floating around and are repeated without them being given much thought – until they are said in front of someone who feels affected by them. In contrast to these personal stories about negative experiences, there were a few signs of more organized forms of anti-Semitism. Something I had not been aware of but which was mentioned frequently during interviews is the existence of CUFI, meaning 'Christians United For Israel'. While this name gives the impression that the organization might support Jewish people it is in fact a Christian Zionist movement that claims that Jewish people will face eternal hell unless they renounce their religion. (Norton 2015) This organization has apparently become more and more present in the United States and is perceived as somewhat threatening or at least annoying by many in the Jewish communities. According to Mitchell there has been a general increase in the percentage of fundamentalist Christians, and therefore the main source of anti-Semitic sentiments, which Jewish people in Alaska are currently experiencing, is actually religiously motivated, stemming from Christianity.

CUFI was one of the few indicators of an organized, institutionalized anti-Semitic movement I encountered, along with incidents at two of the congregations I visited. One was the aforementioned smearing of swastikas on the wall of congregation Beth Sholom in Anchorage in the early 1990s which prompted widespread support from non-Jewish Alaskans. This incident was, while shocking and scary – in particular before they found out who was behind the smearing –, not a serious threat to the congregation but rather another example of the use of distinct words/symbols in relation to Jewry, be it intentional or not, and in light of the perpetrators turning out to be teenagers it was probably simply provocation. More serious were some incidents described by some congregants of OrHatzafon in Fairbanks explaining to me why the synagogue is a small, inconspicuous building that easily goes unnoticed. As a result many people in Fairbanks do not even know there is a synagogue or do not know where it is. According to Brenda, this is a deliberate choice:

Years ago we had issues with anti-Jews to the point where there were swastikas put up and for a really long time we chose to keep low-profile, not that many years ago we've had people

come in threatening us in the synagogue. During high holidays because of what was going on in Israel we had police knowing that.. so over years we have in some respect deliberately kept a low profile and kept a place that would blend in, where we wouldn't stick out of fear of some of the issues that happened in the past. (Brenda, Interview 8)

Louise, curator of the Jewish museum in Anchorage, even wants to obtain a device which she can put around her neck with a button to alert the police. She has had multiple experiences while working in the museum – she is the only person working directly in the museum and is therefore the only person usually there with the visitors – that have left her feeling insecure and unsafe, and it has led her to realize that, should something happen, she might not be able to run to her office in the back of the museum to call the police from the telephone there. Among these incidents were a visitor screaming about how the Jews killed the Christ and another visitor who was carrying a visible gun around with him.

Looking at all the different stories the bits and pieces that people associated with anti-Semitism when I asked them about their experiences, one can indeed say that perhaps Alaska is one of the safest places to be Jewish. Jewish people there feel connected to other Alaskans; they have good ties with different groups and events to celebrate these ties, encouraging mutual interest and understanding. But I cannot confirm what many of my interviewees told me as their very first response to the question of anti-Semitism, namely that there is none at all. The fact that each and every one had experienced moments of being excluded, of not being taken seriously, of not being given a voice in high school due to being of the Jewish faith, or of having to listen to other people using the word 'Jew' in a hurtful and demeaning way indicates that there is some form of anti-Semitism in Alaska, probably in the same way as this exists everywhere, even if in Alaska it is a minor phenomenon. Many of my interviewees had spent years, sometimes decades, living somewhere else as many of them had not been born in Alaska, and they therefore rightly compare living in Alaska to living somewhere else as a Jewish person and out of this comparison, they come to the – probably always correct – conclusion that there is virtually no anti-Semitism in Alaska because it had been so much worse and more widespread in every other place they had lived at.

6.3. Community Within

During my research, there was one aspect that continuously presented itself to me through the interviews I conducted and that therefore needs to be addressed with its own subchapter. While I initially had placed more importance on the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Alaskans, in the field I soon realized that there was a much greater number of tensions *among* Jewish Alaskans than between them and their non-Jewish neighbors. This proved to be challenging at times because as a researcher interested in as holistic a picture as possible, I was in contact with as many different people as possible: of different congregations, but also non-congregation members, secular and religious, old and young. The tensions I witnessed through comments made during the interviews can be illustrated by two main examples:

- Tensions between the two congregations in Anchorage: the Reform congregation Beth Sholom and the Chabad Orthodox congregation Shomrei Ohr
- Tensions between members of the congregation OrHatzafon in Fairbanks and non-congregants/former members of this congregation in Fairbanks

I will begin with the first example, as this was also the first example that I encountered during my research. The very first people I got to know in Alaska were all congregants of the Beth Sholom congregation, and I had already had profound contact with their executive director Rebecca prior to my arrival, when planning interviews and events. In a way, Rebecca was my most important gatekeeper because it was through her that I was able to meet most of the people I ended up having conversations or even interviews with, and it was also through her that I was able to practice participant observation during big events in the synagogue. Consequently, since the very beginning I was confronted with remarks about ‘the other congregation’ and questions about whether I would also talk to them – something that accompanied me from different sides throughout my entire fieldwork and led me to speak of ‘Jewish communities of Alaska’ rather than just ‘the Jewish community of Alaska’. Interestingly enough it became evident that the congregation Beth Sholom had better connections with other minorities than with the Orthodox Jewish congregation in Anchorage, due to several difficulties in the past. This tension between the Orthodox and the Reform synagogue was an important issue raised by Rabbi Mitchell during my interview with him. When I asked him about Holocaust commemorations within the community, he told me there had not been a single community-wide commemoration since he has arrived in Alaska nine

years ago because “there’s no cooperation between the two congregations” and “the ability to get the two congregations to cooperate on that is pretty small” (Mitchell, Interview 3). For six years he was the one to give a speech and the blessing at the days of remembrance ceremony at the air force base, when last year just before the ceremony he was told that Louise, curator of the Jewish museum in Anchorage, would now give the speech and the Orthodox rabbi will be responsible for the benediction. This only aggravated an already tense situation.

Similarly, when I visited the Orthodox congregation in my last week of fieldwork, their rabbi wanted to know who exactly I had been talking to at the other congregation and why I had not come to them sooner, only calming down when I told him I had also talked to a very respected Jewish man living in Anchorage, who had been a community member for several decades.

Unexpectedly, there were numerous members who claimed to be loosely part of both congregations, to either be good friends with members of the respective other congregation or to attend events at both congregations. Consequently, while some experience these tensions as immense and angering, others do not find it difficult to be in between the two. This conflict between the two congregations was an important issue raised by Mary, an artist and gallery owner in Anchorage, who was originally from Switzerland but has spent many decades living in Israel and has converted to Judaism a long time ago. She is a member of the Orthodox congregation and good friends with their rabbi and his wife, despite her not being officially Jewish as she only converted and thus not being recognized by the Orthodox congregation. Upon asking her whether it was important for her to know there is a Jewish community here before she moved here, she answered:

Yes, it was important. We came from Israel. At that time. And there was another congregation what is now also Beth Sholom and they weren't so comfortable for us because they are the American Jewish people. Where we are going (...) there are a lot of Israelis. And there's a big difference between Israeli Jews and American Jews. (...) The whole atmosphere is different. They usually don't speak Hebrew at the other congregation, they play guitar, what we are not used to. They are not Orthodox. And they're very, very liberal, what is nice, though. But we weren't used to.. in Israel.. it's very complicated. Because in Israel I could never meet people like the rabbi. They wouldn't talk to us. (Mary, Interview 12)

Despite her comfort in knowing that in Israel a Chabad rabbi would not even talk to her and yet this rabbi does, she also has her own personal difficulties with the strictness of the

Orthodox congregation. Since she spent many years living in Israel and raised her daughters as Jewish, her family is generally religious. Talking about her eldest daughter, she told me:

(...) if something happens to her, she will not be buried by the rabbi. I will not be buried by the rabbi. Because we are not considered Jewish. I grew up not-Jewish. And I converted... but in New York with a liberal Jewish rabbi (...). I have a girlfriend, her mother was Jewish, she is Jewish. She married a Catholic, she became Catholic. Her children are Catholic... have no clue of Jewishness and the rabbi says they are Jewish. My daughter is not. That pisses me off. (...) So I think if the rabbi and his wife wouldn't have become such good friends it would be different. But they did and they're... we do not talk about it. I know that if I die I will not be buried by them, but by the other. (Mary, Interview 12)

This issue raised by Mary was also an important issue for many of the other Jewish people in town. With there being a Reform and an Orthodox congregation, many who actually feel they would belong to the Orthodox one regarding their mindset, political views or degree of religiosity, have switched to congregation Beth Sholom because they were not considered as Jewish by the Orthodox congregation. Martha, an active member of the Reform congregation is one such person: “They don’t consider me Jewish – I want nothing to do with them” (Martha, Interview 1). Matters become especially tense when, as in Mary’s case, a congregant is still part of the Orthodox congregation, in spite of the fact that he/she will be buried by the Reform congregation. Martha of the congregation Beth Sholom gave me a tour around Anchorage’s Memorial Park cemetery, which has two Jewish sections: one Orthodox and one Reform. The two sections are separated by a fence, and Martha told me there are frequent quarrels between the two congregations to determine who will get buried in which of the two sections.

Similarly noticeable were the tensions between congregants and non-congregants/former congregants of the OrHatzafon congregation in Fairbanks. There I was also subject to numerous questions about who else I would interview for my research and why. This became an issue when I had lunch with four of the most active congregants in Fairbanks and told them I was also interviewing Lloyd and Milton. They knew both of them well as they had been former members but they expressed discontent regarding them ceasing to be active congregants once their children had grown up. A brief discussion evolved, and I was asked what my reasons were for interviewing them. I told them that I was trying to talk to as many different people as possible without limiting my own research in advance and that I was not only looking to interview active congregants but anyone who defines themselves as Jewish.

While accepting this answer one of them, Sharon, still felt the need to clarify that she does not consider them as the ‘right’ people to talk to:

How can I say that politically correct... that is an entity within itself. So you have this core group, you've got these people (...) I could go on and on, you've got this intellect group but when you come down to the people, the movers and the shakers, (...) the actual members! The ones that are proud to make the synagogue available.. I am an educated woman, I have degrees, I have a profession. But you know what? I also find that I am amongst the people and you've got your cliques (...) So if you're talking to these people who have this perspective you have to take into consideration what is the group I am talking to, and that group is not representable of our Jewish community. Those people don't come to the synagogue anymore, Joan makes a wonderful *challah*²⁷! But you know what, when we need the *challah* where is she now? She's not there. (Sharon, Interview 8)

Sharon seemed quite emotional, when she expressed her views on who belongs to the community and who does not, sounding almost personally hurt that some people have stopped coming to the synagogue – leading her to make the statement that the others I would talk to are not representative of the Jewish community of Fairbanks. It is true that some of them stopped being active members of the congregation in part because their children had grown up but many of them also expressed discomfort with the political views of the congregation. Lewis ended his membership when they refused to hold a wedding ceremony for a lesbian couple many years ago and although in the meantime they have had an openly gay summer rabbi and lost some more conservative members due to that, he did not go back.

Concluding this subchapter it requires pointing out that the tensions within the different groups of the Jewish community presented an issue that I had not expected prior to my research. It is one of the main aspects that presented itself to me in a very noticeable manner through the research that I was doing and that thus could not be ignored. The way these conflicts were frequently made a subject of discussion without my influence reminded me of the importance of serendipity in the course of a research project; the need to properly observe the happenings in a research context and to allow for time to readjust one’s research focus if necessary. Serendipity can significantly influence the results of fieldwork as it works as an enhancement for the anthropologist to see what he/she does not expect. (Rivoal/Salazar 2013: 178ff.)

²⁷ A special braided bread baked for the celebration of Shabbat and other Jewish holidays.

7. Geographical Dimension: Influence of Place

*“If you would know what kind of Jew a man is,
ask him where he lives; for no simple factor
indicates as much about the character
of the Jew as the area in which he lives.
It is an index not only to his economic status,
his occupation, his religion,
but to his politics and his outlook on life(...).”*
(Wirth 1927: 68)

This quote by Wirth is very accurate when it comes to the example of Alaskan Jewry as it underlines the importance of a place for Jewish identity. Where one chooses to live expresses something about this person’s identity and therefore their Jewish identity. As Wirth says, it not only tells something about this person’s status and religion, but their general mindset, their way of living. This interplay of place and identity, especially in a remote area such as Alaska, is the topic I will explore further in the chapter at hand. My initial interest is the construction and maintenance of Jewish identity under the extreme conditions that come with remoteness – as is the case in the state of Alaska. In order to do so I carefully separated general statements on Alaska and statements made specifically about the place, the geography, the nature that is Alaska.

The state of Alaska, also referred to as ‘the last frontier’, is the largest state of the United States of America. As presented in chapter 2.2, Huskey and Morehouse’s (1992: 129) depiction of remote areas says that they are “relatively simple parts of large, complex nation states that have elaborate constitutional-legal systems, rich economies, and overarching, dominant cultures”, which is true for Alaska, as it is a part of the United States of America. Bernard and Joel Reisman (1995: 7f.), authors of the 1995 study on Jewish life in Alaska, describe Alaska as “a classic frontier society in that its population density is quite low – dramatically so for Jews who are less than 1% of the general population” (ibid.: 7) and that the vast majority of Alaskans only came there in the forties and Jewish people only in the seventies. Furthermore, it is underdeveloped in the sense that it is a rugged place with its natural environment and economic and employment structures and also very distant from the

places and family networks of the people who have come to Alaska to settle down. Also, most other Jewish people in the United States live in urban areas with Jewish infrastructures such as Hebrew Schools and Synagogues. All this adds to the question what happens to Jewish identity when people live away from their families, with fewer other Jewish people around and with little, if any, Jewish infrastructure at their new chosen destination. Additionally, Alaska may prove to be an even more particular place when it comes to remoteness, due to its “isolation and extreme weather conditions” (ibid.: 8). This aspect of frontier societies is also taken up by Juan Zhang (2014: 376), who points out that “borderlands and frontiers have always been the archetypal ‘remote place’ in popular imagination” and that the remote “becomes a playground where one gambles and takes chances, where one’s guts and wits are put to the test. It promises the very real possibility of turning individuals into reform pioneers (...)” (ibid.: 376f.). The aspects Zhang addresses in these two quotes shall be mirrored in the quotes by my interviewees in this chapter.

Most striking were statements referring to Alaska’s size and state of being largely uninhabited. It is the largest of all the states in the US and at the same time the one with the lowest population density of 1.3 people per square mile, which equals 0.46 people per km². (Worldatlas 2016). If Alaska were counted as a country, it would be the third least populated country on earth with only Greenland and the Falkland Islands being less populated. (Porter 2016). This aspect reflects heavily in many of my interviewees’ views on Alaska and the reasons they had for coming to this place. It can be said that all of my interviewees agreed on the notion that “Alaska offers space to get off the grid” (Martha, Interview 1). This shared notion that Alaska offers space ‘to get off the grid’ is also reflected in Sasha Newell’s (2014: 367) article on remoteness, in which he writes: “Some people (...) seek out remote places to profit from invisibility (...)”. Rabbi Mitchell said something similar:

Even before congregation Beth Sholom was here, there were Jews here. Alaska is kind of a funny place, a lot of people will move here just to get away. The Jews included. There have probably been Jews here for longer than that, Jews who came during the gold rush or as explorers. They didn't wanna be found, just lead their own independent life. (Mitchell, Interview 3)

This quote already addresses a vital point that needs to be taken into consideration when writing about Alaska as a place: the mindset of the people who come to live there or who know little else because they have spent most of their lives living there. During the interviews, there appeared several interesting remarks on people’s ideas of Alaska and what

it meant to live there. First of all, Alaska is seen and experienced as a place with a libertarian view à la 'live and let live'. Martha and Rebecca told me that, even though many people would be considered conservative, the state recently also legalized marijuana and gay marriage – which does not seem to go together but actually makes sense if one considers the extent to which Alaskans believe in this notion of 'live and let live'. Rabbi Mitchell agreed with this and told me that in his eyes Alaska is independent, libertarian and conservative and that there's a "very specific mindset of what you gotta do. There's a certain awareness that the place could kill you, it's a rugged place" (Mitchell, Interview 3). He went on to tell me that Alaska is seen as somewhat separate or different from the rest of the United States, that when people talk about it, they always say "United States and Alaska" and "the lower 48". This shows that in the mindset of many Alaskans the state is somewhat independent and certainly different than the rest of the United States, resembling the way many of my informants felt they were different as Jews and therefore came to Alaska. Living in Alaska requires more of a person, more endurance, more strength perhaps. As Mitchell said, it's a rugged place and the awareness of this is what also ties people together, according to Brenda of the congregation OrHatzafon in Fairbanks: "We're Alaskan, this is who we are. We're a small community, we make it through long, cold winters. We're tied together" (Brenda, Interview 4). This common ground of experiencing the roughness of the place first-hand for many months every year seems to be a factor that ties people together and encourages them to help each other out, to be there for one another. In the course of my interview with Brenda she mentioned the high rate of alcoholism, the fact that in winter one hardly ever sees the sunlight and how under such conditions the most important thing is to be together: "Our community is very small, very home-grown, you know, it's not very fancy but at least we're together" (Brenda, Interview 4). To her the most important feature of being a part of the Jewish community is to be together, rather than being 'fancy'. In this regard, not just Jewish collective identity but also remoteness acts as a unifying factor for the Jewish communities in Alaska.

When listening to my interviewees talk about the power of the place, the fact that it could easily kill you if you are not cautious, I could sense a certain pride in their voice. They seemed proud to be a part of this community, to be living in a place like this, to be able to cope with it. Being Jewish has thus become an additional factor of identity but it also became very clear that all these people were, in addition to being Jewish, proud to be Alaskan and identified as Alaskan and as a part of Alaskan society as a whole. My informant Matthew even designed

a specific tattoo that he had done on his thigh in order to express to which extent Alaska has played a role in the construction of his Jewish identity:

The brilliant stars in the northern sky. The "Bear," the "Dipper," and shining high the great North Star with its steady light. Those are lyrics from the Alaska State song describing the Big Dipper and Polaris which make up the state flag. The predecessor of GPS, Polaris, has always been very important for travelers who are trying to find their way. In a sense Polaris brought me north to find my way back home. You see I was born in Michigan and spent most of my youth bouncing between Michigan and Ontario, CAN. I didn't grow up particularly Jewish. I had a few Jewish friends that I would celebrate the holidays with but that was really it. Someone once told me that the beauty of religion in Alaska is that I could be as Jewish as I wanted without feeling condemned by my peers. This statement is very true never once was I stared at by my tribesman for being the tattoo covered French Canadian-Moroccan boy wearing Tzitzit and a Kippah. (Matthew, Interview 13)

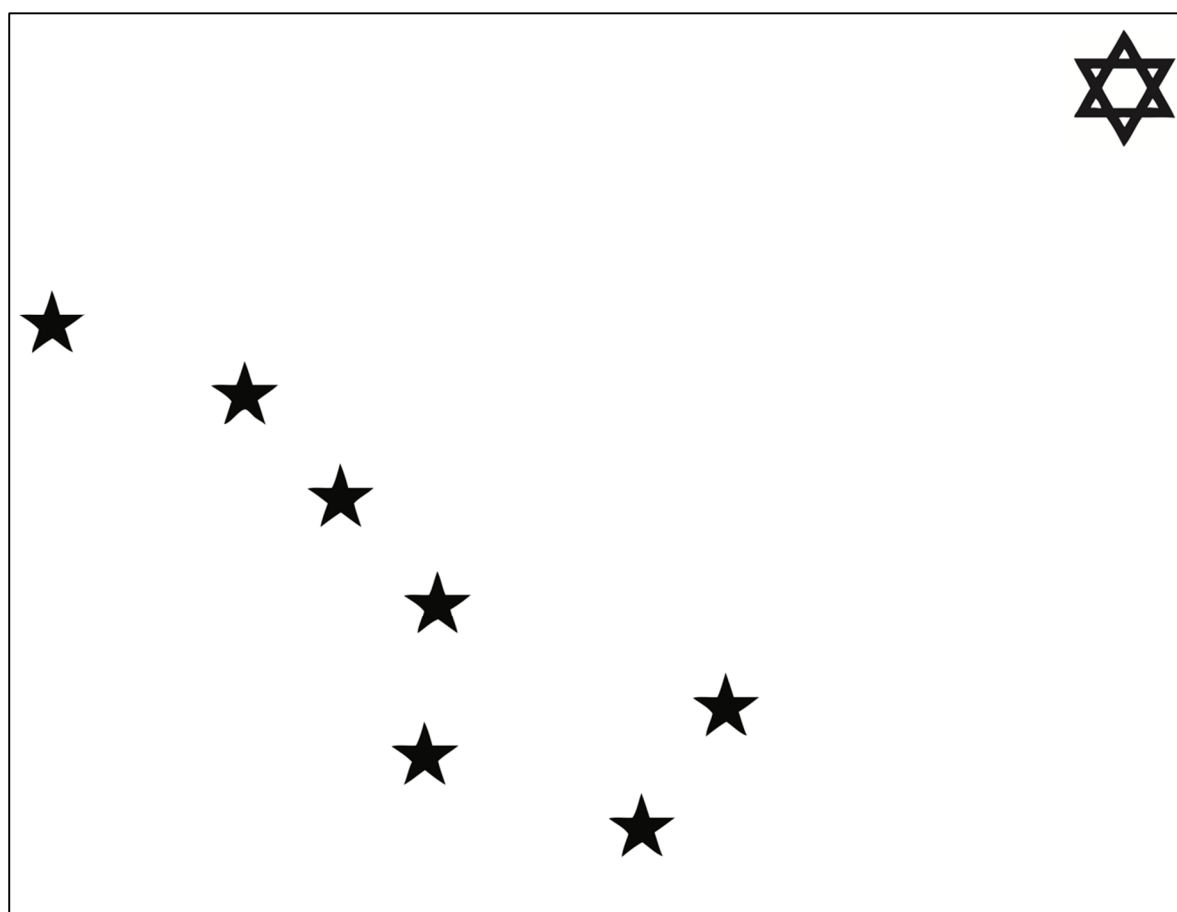


Figure 8: Matthew's Tattoo Design (Illustration by Matthew, Lansing, April 2016)

This text was written by Matthew after I asked him to describe to me what the meaning behind his tattoo is. Although having had connections to Judaism all his life, he only discovered this part of his identity after having come to Alaska and coming in touch with the Jewish communities there. It shows that certain surroundings and meeting people with a specific mindset can enhance one's individual expression of oneself and the development of certain parts of one's identity. In part, this tattoo also brings to mind Gans' concept of 'symbolic ethnicity', as Matthew uses a traditional symbol – the Star of David – but abstracts it and uses it in a new way for the expression of his unique Jewish identity. (Gans 1979: 7ff.)

In Alaska the strategies for working around the religious rules are numerous, and these are practiced even by the rabbis themselves (see chapter 5.3.1 'Religiosity'). Being Jewish in Alaska in that way is not different from *any* other place in the world but from *most* places, I would say. It is probably similar to being Jewish in other relatively cold, Northern and rather desolate places, but considering that Fairbank's congregation OrHatzafon (which means 'light of the North') is the northernmost Synagogue in the world, there probably are not very many regions worldwide where there is a reasonably sized Jewish community this far north. Even Rabbi Mitchell concluded that "the basic nature of this place is what makes the Jews here a little different" (Mitchell, Interview 3). To be Jewish in Alaska, first and foremost in a religious sense, means that you really have to want to be Jewish and observe every aspect of Jewish life despite any difficulty and at the same time it will mean that you probably can't be as strictly Jewish as you might like. Lewis told me: "If we really wanted to be a part of that life then we would have stayed where we came from" (Lewis, Interview 5), suggesting that those Jews who *have* moved to Alaska want something different, want a perhaps unique form of Jewish identity that is not based on the strict following of religious rules but on being capable of living in a remote place: somewhat isolated, but free. They are the ones seeking to live an independent life, to leave behind known structures and to find space for an individual identity that can be anything you want it to be. Lloyd reflected on his choice of moving to Alaska by concluding:

I don't believe I would have had as good a life anywhere else, if I'd stayed where I was it wouldn't have been so interesting. There are millions more people in California, you just get lost in the crowd. And here everyone is an individual, and you know them. If I go to Anchorage or Juneau (...) they know me. It gives you a feeling that you count for something. (Lloyd, Interview 7)

8. Historical Dimension: Significance of the Holocaust

In this chapter, I want to address the topic that is probably the first association with Judaism overall for many people all over the world. This association leads to people going to a 'Jewish museum' and being surprised that it is not a 'Holocaust museum' (something that happens regularly at the Jewish museum I work for). When I ask the teenagers I guide through the museum what is the first thing that comes to their mind when I say 'Jewish', they say 'Hitler'. With the Holocaust being such an enormity it tends to overshadow that Judaism is much more than the years 1938-1945, that there is a vast history of Judaism of over 4,000 years, and also that there was anti-Semitism long before Hitler.

The specific focus of this subchapter is the meaning that the Holocaust has acquired for specifically American Jews within the last few decades, in particular since the 1970s, when it has become "a lens to view developments in Jewish identity in America" (Magid 2015: 102). Shaul Magid has written an essay on the Holocaust and Jewish identity in America, examining its uniqueness and its impact on Jewish identity in the United States suggesting that this sense of uniqueness could be passed on to Jewish people in general as well: "(...) if the Holocaust as genocide against the Jews is unique and thus an exceptional case in human history, perhaps the Jews after the Holocaust (...) can justifiably inherit that exceptional status" (ibid.). Addressing the now increasing multi-ethnicity of American Jewry, Magid suggests that the Holocaust will change in meaning throughout the years as it takes its place next to other tragedies that the members of increasingly multi-ethnic families feel much closer to. This is not to mean that the Holocaust will be forgotten by any means but rather that it has to share its status with other tragedies and traumas.

While Magid's views are certainly worth considering, and he certainly has a point acknowledging the relatively new extent to which multi-ethnicity is spread among Jewish families and the impact this has on the narratives within these families, I have reason to believe that this is not entirely realistic due to the fact that I have witnessed that, even geographically very far from the location of the Holocaust and among many people who have no familial history in that regard, it is still being commemorated actively and certainly has a heavy impact within those Jewish congregations I came to visit.

Herbert Gans suggests that the Holocaust was initially more ignored than commemorated, perhaps because it was immediately after the war and still too traumatic. Moreover, most of the literature and films about it had not been made yet. Instead, Jewish people who had just arrived in the United States were occupied with building their new lives, and so the two “greatest events of modern Jewish history, the murder of six million Jews by Hitler and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine had had remarkably slight effects on the inner life of American Jewry up until the mid-fifties” (Glazer 1957: 114f.). Considering the fact that the Holocaust has gained enormous importance in the course of the last few decades Gans writes: “As a result, the Holocaust may now be serving as a new symbol for the threat of group destruction” (Gans 1979: 11); by ‘group destruction’ he means the rising rates of intermarriage, the continuing decrease of participation in Jewish religion and finally that the anti-Semitism which first and second generation Jews in the United States had to endure is no longer a serious threat in the sense of group destruction, implying that a serious threat in that sense is ‘useful’ to the Jewish community as it contributes to maintaining their common identity.

Another very important aspect that was introduced on a regular basis by my interviewees was the role of the Holocaust for Jewish identity. During my research in Alaska I was surprised by the fact that so many people within the Jewish communities knew about Austria. Usually when going to another continent Austrians find that very few people know exactly where Austria is or know anything else about it but within Alaska’s Jewish communities there exists a surprisingly wide knowledge about it, and many people had already been to Austria visiting friends and family. Upon my arrival in Alaska I thought that the Holocaust would not have much significance for the Jewish communities in Alaska because of its geographical distance and also due to the fact that Alaska did not end up becoming a main refuge area for persecuted Jews of the Nazi regime. However, most of the ancestors of people I met were originally from Europe. Many of them had emigrated to the US already before the Nazi era and only few had victims or survivors of the Holocaust in their family but there was still a connection to this issue, and much to my surprise the Holocaust turned out to be very present within the Jewish communities. Even for those who converted to Judaism it seemed to be a fundamental part of Jewish identity to deal with the Holocaust, tell their children about it and visit former concentration camps in Europe. The role the Holocaust plays in the constitution of Jewish identity was very much felt during the *Shabbat* service on May 15 in the congregation Beth Sholom in Anchorage. I gave a speech about Austria’s involvement in the Holocaust and its

way of dealing with the past and about the current Jewish community of Vienna. Many people asked questions and were extremely moved. After my speech approximately ten teenagers from Anchorage and Fairbanks who participated in the March of the Living in Auschwitz this April gave a presentation about their experience going to Auschwitz, other former concentration camps and then Israel. Their trip to the former death camps in Poland and to Israel two weeks prior to my arrival was very much talked of and considered extremely important. One could sense that taking part in such a trip had an immense significance for the members of the Jewish community; people felt proud that these Alaskan teenagers had been given the opportunity to take part in something so meaningful. This type of trips are also the chosen topic of research for Jack Kugelmass in his article “Missions to the Past”, in which he writes:

Disconnected from the Old World irrevocably now because of the Holocaust, and unable to maintain an architecture of memory domestically because of an almost uncanny degree of economic success and mobility, North American Jews have an apparent need to reestablish sites of memory and that need has taken on considerable urgency in recent years. (Kugelmass 1996: 200)

Kugelmass addresses a very crucial topic here. According to him, ethnic groups are uniquely committed to memory but one has to consider that collective memory is neither intact and permanent nor something that keeps on being passed on from generation to generation, but rather a “continual process of engagement and disengagement, of remembering and forgetting (...)” (ibid.). In the last few decades an increasing number²⁸ of Jewish people has started to visit the former death camps in Poland. They typically go on group trips organized by synagogues or youth movements usually sold as 1-week packages. And while some of them may actually come to Poland in order to search for their roots, to commemorate ancestors, to learn more about their parents’ childhood in a small Polish village, “by far the largest number had no such experience themselves” (ibid.) but instead are North American and Israeli Jews in every age group. Kugelmass sums up the matter by writing: “for Jews, visiting the death camps of Poland has become obligatory, as if there were no other way to really know the recent past” (ibid.) and that they “do so to participate in a secular ritual, one that confirms who they are as Jews, and perhaps even more so as North American or Israeli Jews” (ibid.). This corresponds with my perception of the teenagers’ narrative of their own trip, as well as the reactions they received from within the community during and after their

²⁸ Kugelmass states “tens of thousands” (ibid.: 201), and this was just in 1996.

presentation. In their presentation the teenagers agreed that, while they had already learned about the Holocaust in school, it was an entirely different and life-changing experience to actually see the size of the camps. Several also remarked how proud they now felt to be Jewish and to for the first time really feel like a part of this worldwide Jewish community, to which many of the audience members visibly agreed and nodded.

All the congregations I visited had had eyewitnesses give talks, theatre productions that were Holocaust-related or authors speak about their Holocaust-related books. People had read “The Diary of Anne Frank”, and in the Beth Sholom congregation they even had a *Talmud*²⁹ that was rescued by a man during the November pogrom in Vienna in 1938.



Figure 9: *Talmud* from Vienna (Photo taken by the author, Anchorage, May 2015)

²⁹ The *Talmud* is a collection of writings that offer explanations on the meaning of the *Torah* and the application of its laws.

During the interview with Brenda of the OrHatzafon congregation in Fairbanks, she told me that a group of Alaskan children had performed the opera 'Brundibár' in the opera of Fairbanks. Brundibár was an opera that children in Terezín had to perform. In the production in Fairbanks, Ela Stein Weissberger, the author of "The Cat with the Yellow Star" and the only surviving member of the original cast in Terezín, also gave a talk as part of the performance. After telling me about this, Brenda said: "The slogan of the Jews is 'Never again'... to anyone. Not just to the Jews, but genocide in itself... has got to be eliminated from our being. It can never happen again" (Brenda, Interview 4). In his subchapter on the making of a new diasporic Jewish identity, Ezrachi states that "as time goes by, most Jews in the Diaspora will not have personal memories of displacement and immigration as the foundation of their identities. Nor will they be able to relate to the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel as concrete and personal memories" (Ezrachi 2012: 213f.). While this is certainly true it is yet another example of how Alaska might be a little different from other places. The vast majority of people I met there had no personal memories of being displaced or persecuted, and yet a general sense of it seemed to linger in the air, a general awareness that people shared and commemorated, although most of them had not experienced it themselves.

As Milton, one of the oldest Jewish people living in Alaska, said about the Holocaust: "I can't imagine that it's anything but central in all Jewish identity" (Milton, Interview 6). The personal tales of one's feelings towards the Holocaust differed widely from one another, yet everyone seemed to have their own story linked to the Holocaust. A notable example of such a narrative was given by Harriet, owner of an art gallery in Valdez, whom I met by coincidence during our weekend there. She is one of (at most) five Jewish people living in Valdez and came to the United States as a young adult with her parents fleeing from Romania where anti-Semitism was part of the daily routine. During the interview she told me that her parents had been Holocaust survivors, both had been in concentration camps, and almost her entire family was killed in concentration camps. When asked whether she thinks the Holocaust should be remembered, she immediately said "Yes! Very much so. But you have to have people that are interested" (Harriet, Interview 10). She remembers being a child and listening to her mother talk about her experiences with her friends, who were all Holocaust survivors themselves and was never told 'to not listen'. For her own son she chose a very different approach only telling him about the Holocaust, when he asked her, but never out of her own initiative. When I asked her whether her son knew that his grandparents were

survivors, she said she did not know. Although her intention for not telling him remains unknown, I assume it is partly because of her own intense confrontation with the Holocaust as a child, leading her to only talk to her son about it when he explicitly asked. Many others said that whether the Holocaust is relevant for Jewish identity in Alaska is very personal and individual. Many of my informants said they grew up feeling a normal degree of compassion, when hearing about it, but did not have any personal link with it other than reading books or watching films about it until they experienced something that made them connect with it in a deeper manner. For one this was a visit to the Holocaust museum in Los Angeles stating that it is “more personal now” (Sharon, Interview 8). Matthew had always felt difficulties expressing compassion when he was confronted with something related to the Holocaust until he visited Yad Vashem with two very good friends of his, brothers, and he saw their last name on numerous plaques for victims. The knowledge that “someone that potentially is from their family had to suffer through this (...) created this connection for me”. In the end he thanked them because he now felt a connection.

For many of the teenagers I spoke to this changing moment was their trip to Poland where they participated, as I mentioned before, in the March of the Living at the Auschwitz concentration camp, which took place one month before my arrival in Alaska. Their experiences from this trip were still very present when I talked to them. One of them, Dylan, told me that they were accompanied by a woman who was a survivor and how this was an intense experience for him:

We had Trudy Album, a Holocaust survivor, with us on this trip and she was just the most amazing woman I had ever met. Like we walked out of the crematorium and everyone's just breaking down in tears and she's over in the corner telling jokes because you have to live and she's just the whole time positive outlook on life and just focusing on what you can affect... she was amazing and so it definitely gave me a different perspective on the people who made it through. (...) I feel like I understand it more now. And I know more... I feel more... it's interesting because we're the last generation that's gonna get to talk to Holocaust survivors and so it's our responsibility to pass it on. (Dylan, Interview 8)

For Dylan it was striking to meet an actual survivor and see which strategies she has developed in order to survive psychologically. He is aware of the fact that he is part of the last generation who has the privilege of meeting survivors, and for him this entails the responsibility to pass it on to the next generations, who will not be able to meet survivors. While many experience it as life changing and enriching to develop a more personal connection to the Holocaust, others underline the importance of keeping the Holocaust and

Jewry separate to a certain degree. Lloyd said that he watches every movie about the Holocaust and feels an “almost morbid attraction to it”, yet, when asked to what degree he feels the Holocaust is relevant for Jewish identity, he complained that often Jewry is set equal to the Holocaust:

Well, regrettably it is. And some people regret that because they don't want their identity to be about that and of course many people think that non-Jews think of that all the time. I remember I was telling my friend “Oh it's a Jewish holiday” and she said “Oh you know, I was just listening to something about the Holocaust on the radio”. So I say 'Jewish' and she hears 'Holocaust'. And I'm like that's not what I was talking about. (Lloyd, Interview 7)

Another important point to be considered is how early and to what degree parents should tell their children about the Holocaust. Lloyd has found this to be a difficult decision in the course of raising his own children: “And then there's always the question how much do you talk about the Holocaust. I do not want to make them feel like victims and I don't want them to associate Judaism with something... you know, if you do this you're gonna die somehow” (Lloyd, Interview 7).

In conclusion, a strong connection to the Holocaust is not something fundamental to Jewish identity but something that still comes to influence the lives of many Jewish people regardless of whether there is a pre-existing connection to it or not. This made it evident that the common remembrance of something that has shaped what Judaism means truly contributes and constitutes Jewish identity, even when your family was not directly persecuted by the Nazis. Each person seemed to know someone who was persecuted or whose parents or other relatives were once persecuted by the Nazis, and the knowledge that there are people in the community who were persecuted is enough to make the Holocaust very present, even though Alaska is geographically very distant to Europe. I would like to end this subchapter with a quote from Lewis, who brought it to the point:

So for Jewish people who live in Alaska I think there's no kind of community... since the Holocaust doesn't play a role in the community of how we relate to each other. But I think you'll find in many individuals the Holocaust is somewhere in their own history. And maybe it's like the stone thrown in the water, their ripples go out. And I think with this, the ripples go out to the next generation. Because of the way how it affected that family and how it influenced the way I was brought up. It keeps going on. (Lewis, Interview 5)

9. Global Dimension: The Jewish Diaspora

In this final chapter I will discuss the global aspect of Jewish identity and define the term ‘Jewish diaspora’ in order to examine whether the Jewish communities in Alaska share the characteristics of an archetypal Jewish diaspora. While being linked to the Jewish diaspora, belonging to a worldwide community based on common religion and culture is something that all Jewish communities worldwide share to a certain extent. I would dare say that there are certain aspects within the Alaskan Jewish congregations that are different when compared to those in other parts of the world. To be Jewish in Alaska in a religious sense means that you really have to want to be Jewish and observe every aspect of Jewish life despite any difficulty and at the same time it will mean that you probably cannot be as strictly Jewish as you might like.

Before coming to the conclusions concerning the results of this thesis, I find it crucial to address the global dimension of Jewish identity through its existence in the Jewish diaspora. The two aspects I will examine in this chapter are the meaning of ‘diaspora’ and the link between the formation and maintenance of Jewish identity due to its existence within the diaspora. James Clifford defines the main features of a diaspora as follows: “history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, and alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship” (Clifford 1994: 305). William Safran uses a similar approach but extends the definition of diaspora to migrants: at the base of a diaspora are migrants, who have left their homelands and have moved to a different country. This applies to immigrants in general,

but diasporas comprise special kinds of immigrants because they have retained a memory of, a cultural connection with, and a general orientation toward their homelands; they have institutions reflecting something of a homeland culture and/or religion; they relate in some (symbolic or practical) way to their homeland; they harbor doubts about the full acceptance by their host land; they are committed to their survival as a distinct community; and many of them have retained a myth of return. (Safran 2004: 10)

Safran goes on to state that in fact the Jewish diaspora was one of the first, if not *the* first dispersed community and therefore the Jewish diaspora remains archetypal in several respects. In his article “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” he even states that while there are certainly other types of diasporas, such as the Armenian,

Turkish or Greek diaspora, “none of them fully conforms to the ‘ideal type’ of Jewish diaspora” (Safran 1991: 84). One reason for the Jewish diaspora being the archetype of diasporas, and a very crucial one, is the “absence of a physical homeland for nearly two millennia and the widespread doubts in the international community in general and its intellectual elite in particular, whether such a homeland should exist at all” (Safran 2004: 10). In fact, Safran also lists several other reasons for which the Jewish diaspora could be considered the archetypal one: that Jewish people are still not fully accepted by their host societies and are confronted with anti-Semitic sentiments, even in countries that have officially taken stance in favor of the Jewish population (like Germany after World War II, for example). That even in their homeland Israel they are surrounded by enemies, much like in the diaspora, and diasporic characteristics such are transferred even on the homeland. That the connection between Jews and the diaspora has been considered normal and a given for thousands of years, to an extent that it has been featured in countless poems, songs, and legends with the example of ‘the wandering Jew’. (ibid.)

Interestingly Vijay Agnew opposes this view and proposes a more open and perhaps modern notion, namely that an ‘ideal diaspora’ does not exist and that it does not have to be “characterized by its orientation to roots nor its desire for a permanent return to the homeland” (Agnew 2005: 4) but that it is rather “defined by its ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations” (ibid.). Diaspora has indeed become a widespread term and therefore has undergone transformation; it is no longer used to refer exclusively to the Jewish diaspora – much like the word ‘holocaust’ has become used for all kinds of mass murder despite the fact that originally it was used to describe the mass murder of millions of Jews during the Nazi era. Safran states that ‘diaspora’ can be used to refer to a diaspora in the ethnic as well as the religious sense. Attempting to sum up the meaning of a diaspora identity he claims that:

Diaspora membership is a matter both of status and identity, and identity is relational, contextual, and time-bound. In many cases, moreover, individual notions of diaspora and homeland are figurative. (...) Being in a diaspora implies a tension between being in one place physically – the place where one lives and works – and thinking regularly of another place far away. (Safran 2004: 12)

I think it is an important point that Safran makes with this statement: the everlasting importance and presence of another country that might be far away and its ongoing

contribution to one's own identity. Here it is interesting, though, that this other country that is of such high relevance for a person might be the ancestral homeland but it might just as well be an actual prior homeland where one was raised, a country that was initially a host land and thus part of the diaspora as well. For many American Jews this would be a European country or Russia, for example. During the interviews I conducted Israel was generally quite present: many of my interviewees had lived there or travelled there several times, and they had often experienced it as a changing experience. One could certainly say that Israel was on their minds. I do, however, concur with Agnew's more open view that focuses on the recreation of culture in different locations.³⁰

A question that is raised by Safran is whether diaspora is necessarily a per-se good or bad thing. Many diasporas came into being due to circumstances of persecution and exile for a certain group of people. The members of these groups thus experience victimization and oppression prior to finding themselves part of a diaspora but these negative and sometimes traumatizing circumstances that create a diaspora are not "necessarily perpetuated in diaspora" (ibid.: 15). Often members of a diaspora experience prosperity and success in their host countries, especially Jewish people who emigrated to the United States. Safran asks what happens when a "community's orientation toward the home country (...) has been so weakened that there is little left except a vague memory (...)" (ibid.). According to him, Jewish people in the United States are increasingly:

(...) 'de-diasporizing' as their identities are gradually merged with the majority of the host societies of the United States and Western Europe among whom they live, especially as the markers of their uniqueness – language, religion, lifestyle, and even collective memory – weaken. Yet there are periodic 'triggering' events, either in the homeland or the host land, that tend to revive the diasporic identities of ethnic or religious groups, such as systematic persecution, religious intolerance, genocides, or natural disasters. (ibid.)

Boyarin and Boyarin take the thought of an in itself global Jewish identity further and link it to the diaspora saying that "diasporic identity is a disaggregated identity. Jewishness disrupts the very categories of identity because it is not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these in dialectical tension with one another" (Boyarin/Boyarin 1993: 721). This global aspect of Jewish identity is also addressed by Andrew Buckser, an anthropologist who has done research over a period of five years within the Jewish community of Copenhagen. In

³⁰ This will be further addressed in the following subchapter.

his chapter on the connections of the Danish Jewish communities with the global world he makes the following statement:

Jewishness has been an identity that transcends national borders; Jews have been dispersed among a variety of countries, and their links to coreligionists in distant places have often had more social significance than their relationships with local neighbors. Jewish history is almost uniquely international, involving repeated displacement to almost every corner of the globe over a period of two thousand years. As a result, it is impossible to describe Jewishness in any particular spot without reference to the worldwide whole, the international network of kinship and cultural links through which all Jews must, at least in part, understand themselves. (Buckser 2003: 156)

As Buckser mentions in this quote, many Jewish people have relatives who live somewhere else and they also came from somewhere else as a whole. This is especially true for Alaska's Jewish communities, of which only 6% of the members were born in Alaska and the others having moved there from many different places across the United States and even the world. It is no exception to meet members of a Jewish congregation and find out about their relatives from New York, Austria or even Yemen. When everywhere else in the world people are having trouble knowing where Austria is located, within Jewish congregations there is a broad knowledge of many countries because they have already visited their relatives who live there. Not to mention the fact that many Jewish people spend some time in their lives living in Israel and thus experience a very different setting within the world. In addition, many Jewish people also go on trips – to former concentration camps in European countries and to Israel for their birthright trip '*Taglit*'³¹.

9.1. Alaska and the Diaspora

In this subchapter I want to briefly discuss whether the Jewish communities of Alaska share the characteristics of a 'typical diaspora', as presented in chapter 9. In the most classical sense one could argue that it is not a representation of the typical Jewish diaspora, as virtually no Jews living in Alaska have themselves faced persecution and have as a result come to Alaska nor do all, or even most, of them share a common country of origin. Neither have any of my informants expressed the wish to live in Israel: their life goal was not in any way to

³¹ *Taglit* is a free ten-day trip to Israel for young adults who are Jewish, funded by the not-for-profit organization 'Taglit – Birthright Israel'. (Birthright)

return to this far-away ‘homeland’. Quite the opposite was true; many of my informants expressed explicitly that living in Alaska was right for them and that they continue to make a conscious choice to live there because they would not have a better life anywhere else. They identified, along with being Jewish, as primarily Alaskan, even if they were not born or raised there.

However, when looking at it more closely, the Jewish communities of Alaska certainly do fulfill certain requirements in order to be considered as part of this typical diaspora. Although there is no apparent desire to live in Israel many have shared with me their desire to go there again, be it on a vacation or for other purposes that entail a stay there, be it for a few weeks, months or even years. Also, many said to have experienced a kind of transformation after having been to Israel, especially young adults who went there in the course of their birthright trip, such as Lloyd’s daughter: “She had a very good time. I think it changed her view (...) yeah, it must have” (Lloyd, Interview 7). Matthew also went travelling by himself to Israel and said that this trip really meant a lot to him and that he learned a lot of things while there. In another one of his tattoos he has two lines in Hebrew saying: “Morocco may be my blood, but my heart beats for Israel” (Matthew, Interview 13).

Additionally, certain parts of Israeli culture are recreated in various forms, be it through Israeli cuisine or Hebrew courses or the way services are held in the synagogue – as Mary explained (see chapter 6.3) that she attends the Orthodox congregation because it is where the Israelis go, the services are held in Hebrew and there is no guitar music. As a result, hybrid forms of culture develop and are shared by many Jewish people living in Alaska. And although most of them did not endure persecution themselves, past generations in their families have, even if this was more than a hundred years ago. They all share a family’s history shaped by an origin from somewhere else, be it Israel, another country in the Middle East or Europe, in most, if not all, cases due to persecution. And this story of persecution was passed down from generation to generation, and thus to the current one. This means that, while they did not experience persecution themselves, their family’s history is marked by it and so is their own life story.

Listed as one of the characteristics of a diaspora in chapter 9 is “thinking regularly of another place far away” (Agnew 2005: 12), a characteristic that is certainly visible in the Jewish communities in Alaska: Israel is present in their everyday lives, through media, through

friends and family who are currently there; the Middle East conflict is talked about. CUFI was described as one of the main forms of institutionalized anti-Semitism that can currently be found in Alaska and the United States in general, and many feel the need to solidarize with Israel. Lewis described this in the following manner:

So I think one of the other things that is a very powerful force for young Jewish people today is the... especially the ones from liberal families, secular families... is the politics of Israel and the Middle East. Because there are many of the American Jewish organizations that have kind of drawn a line that said that you either love Israel (and that's what it means to be Jewish) or you're an anti-Semitic Jew. A self-hating Jew is the term. (Lewis, Interview 5)

Consequently, for many young Jewish people it is not an option to not feel solidarity towards Israel and to form an opinion on the matter, and this in turn enhances the link between Alaska's Jewish communities and Israel.

As presented in chapter 9 Safran (2004: 15) describes that under extreme conditions a revival of diasporic identities of a religious or ethnic group can be triggered. He exemplifies this by listing traumatic events, such as genocides or natural disasters. I would, however, count the persistently difficult – even if to a much lower extent difficult than traumatic events – living conditions in remote areas such as Alaska as a potentially triggering factor in the enhancement of the diasporic identity within the Jewish communities there. While the Jewish communities of Alaska may not be the most typical representation of the Jewish diaspora, as portrayed in chapter 9, they certainly are influenced to a great extent by Israel and Israeli culture. Any example of Jewry outside of Israel is to be considered as part of the Jewish diaspora in whichever unique form it takes. As Agnew (2005: 4) notes, an ideal diaspora does not exist and is mainly defined by the recreation of a culture in diverse locations, as I have found to be the case within the Jewish communities of Alaska.

10. Conclusion

This thesis' aim was to explore in detail the topic of Jewish identity and how it is constructed and maintained under the extreme conditions of remoteness while using the example of my case study in Alaska's Jewish communities in May 2015. This aim was pursued by, on the one hand, analyzing the theoretical concepts on different forms of Jewish identity and the embedding of such Jewish identities within the diaspora and, on the other hand, by analyzing the actual practices and views on related themes of the Jewish communities currently living in Alaska.

The theoretical part in the beginning of this thesis investigated the general concepts of identity, ethnicity and remoteness, thereby constituting the groundwork of the themes of this thesis. After a short history of Jewish Alaska, the results of my field study in Alaska were presented entailing an analytical description of the various aspects that together form the construction and maintenance of Jewish identity. This empirical part of my thesis started with a more detailed examination of the theoretical concepts of religious identity and Jewish identity as well as the different aspects playing into the construction of this identity such as ethnicity, religion and place. This theoretical framework was presented alongside my informants' views on Jewry and, more specifically, Judaism as a religion and the extent to which it was practiced. The next chapter elaborated on the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish people living in Alaska. Furthermore, the influence of Alaska as a place on Jewish identity was explored as well as the position of Alaska's Jewish communities in the global Jewish diaspora and in how far the Holocaust is significant for Jewish identity under conditions of remoteness. This empirical chapter placed the personal experiences and perceptions of Jewish Alaskans in the center, simultaneously providing the necessary theoretical framework to allow for a contextualization of these personal views.

By employing a multiple method approach grounded on the use of different qualitative research methods – like the semi-structured interview, participant observation and qualitative content analysis – an in-depth analysis of this relatively unique phenomenon was enabled.

Before proceeding by answering my research question, I would like to draw attention to the anthropological study of Hal Levine and compare his results with mine to underline the

distinctiveness of Alaska when investigating identity in remote areas. Levine has done research in the Jewish community of New Zealand, which in contrast to Alaska's northernmost synagogue is home to the world's southernmost synagogue, located in Dunedin. According to the New Zealand Census 2013 there are 6,867 Jewish people living in New Zealand, which make up 0.15% of the New Zealand population. Most of them live in Auckland and Wellington, and each of these cities have an Orthodox and a Reform synagogue, as well as Sunday schools, youth groups etcetera. There are also synagogues in Christchurch and Dunedin. (Levine 1997: 79)

Levine discusses some of his findings in the book "Constructing Collective Identity – A Comparative Analysis of New Zealand Jews, Maori, and Urban Papua New Guineans", which was published in 1997. Prior to presenting his results and conclusions of his research, he draws the reader's attention to some theoretical approaches that should be considered when thinking about Jewish identity or identity in general for that matter. In the beginning of his chapter, Levine asks whether the idiosyncratic ideas of individuals mean anything to Jewish people as a group and adds that the "persistence of certain ethnic groups, previously shapers of identity, now depends on the affiliation of those who choose to identify" (ibid.: 74). It is at this point that he introduces Gans' concept of 'symbolic ethnicity'³², a voluntary form of identity in which one can choose between several ways of identifying as a Jewish person: being a member of a congregation, belonging to a certain group or studying history, which can help to express identity without having to alter one's everyday life too much.

For his study, Levine (ibid.: 80f.) gathered data from 93 semi-structured interviews with Jews from New Zealand (40 of which had moved to Australia). Interviewees were asked about their family's origin, their upbringing, their participation in Jewish traditions, their feelings about the Holocaust, Israel and anti-Semitism, to a large extent the same aspects I asked my own informants about. An important result of his study is the invisibility of New Zealand Jews. Few of them proclaim themselves as Jewish, and they feel like there is no general awareness of Judaism. Many of Levine's interviewees for instance had been asked several times by non-Jewish people whether they were a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew. A result of the non-Jewish New Zealanders' lack of awareness of the Jewish community/religion is that there is also little anti-Semitism. (ibid.: 93ff.)

³² See chapter 5 for a more precise portrayal of 'symbolic ethnicity'.

Although in comparison to the Alaskan Jewish communities, especially the biggest one in Anchorage, there was certainly more awareness of this Jewish community by the non-Jewish public while this aspect of little anti-Semitism due to a certain invisibility was also the case. Wanda for example told me that it is very easy to blend in and therefore easier to live in Alaska as a Jewish person than as a black person, for example. Levine (ibid.: 97) claims that there is nothing that “positively relates Jewishness to being a citizen of New Zealand” and therefore “Jewish identity can easily become relegated to a part-time, voluntary, symbolic ethnicity”. As a result, young and highly committed Jews who want to live a Jewish life emigrate.

The differences between Levine’s findings and my own findings are striking. While for Alaskan Jews it is also mainly an individual choice to what extent they want to express their Jewish identity and therefore part of the aforementioned ‘symbolic ethnicity’, I have found that there seem to be more positive relations between Jewry and Alaska than between Jewry and New Zealand. Most of my informants were proud of being Alaskan, living in Alaska, and identified heavily with a ‘specific Alaskan mindset’ and way of life. They were proud to live in a place so remote and therefore challenging. They were also proud to be Jewish and to have found their individual ways of expressing this Jewish identity, of combining being Alaskan and being Jewish, and being American. A unique form of identity that combines all three rather than feeling like one excludes or diminishes the other could be observed. An important point to be drawn from this brief comparison is that, despite the numerous characteristics that remote places share, they are far from being all alike. While Alaska and New Zealand might share a low population density (and thus a low Jewish population), a lack of an extensive Jewish infrastructure (such as *kosher* grocery stores, and rabbis and *mikvahs* for every community) and a sense of separation to the rest of the world, being Jewish in Alaska appears by no means to be the same as being Jewish in New Zealand. As examined in chapter 2.2, a place’s remoteness also depends on its connectivity to surrounding regions, its environmental extremes, its physical character (Harms/Hussain 2014; Huskey 2006). In comparison to New Zealand, Alaska has a much more extreme climate with a very wide temperature range and long winters. It additionally differs from New Zealand in one crucial point: Alaska is a semi-enclave of the United States and, although located relatively far from the other US states, Alaska is still a part of them, run by the same government and predominantly influenced by American culture, which is why my informants not only

perceived themselves as ‘Alaskan Jewish’ but also in part as ‘American Jewish’, despite their emphasis on Alaska being different from the other US states. This interplay of Alaska’s remoteness (with all the conditions this entails) and its belonging to the United States creates a very specific case for the examination of Jewish identity.

There the question poses itself: how is Jewish identity constructed and maintained under conditions of remoteness? I will begin by addressing the construction of Jewish identity. During my research I encountered several people who had come to Alaska to let go of their Jewish identity or who were not even Jewish when they moved there. People from both of these groups ended up being a highly active member of a Jewish community in Alaska, both in a religious sense or otherwise. In this case, the term ‘reconstruction’ is more appropriate than ‘construction’, as these people had already had a Jewish identity in the previous location they had lived at and then reconstructed this former identity to a new form of identity once they came to Alaska. Especially interesting in this regard is the example of Lewis, who, when asked if he had been a part of a Jewish community when growing up, said the following: “In New York I was surrounded by that world and really wanted to get away from that world, far away from that world. Because I saw it as very small and very, very narrow and I got very far away from it” (Lewis, Interview 5). In the last part of this quote he refers to Alaska and just how remote a place it is, perhaps implying that there are few places in the world where one can feel this far away from everything else. And still, Lewis, in spite of his aim to get away from this Jewish world he had grown up in, then became the co-founder of the farthest North Jewish film festival worldwide in Fairbanks, Alaska, which has now been running for 18 years (he himself worked on it for 15 years). The reasons he states for his part in the film festival are as follows: “Well, I thought that you know since I’m not involved in the synagogue and I don’t really participate in any organized events, that this is one contribution I can make, a cultural contribution” (Lewis, Interview 5). This example underlines well Lewis’s underlying need of still being a part of the Jewish community *somehow*, of contributing at least to the Jewish culture, if not the religion.

Likewise, many people who had had no prior affiliations with Jewry or who had only had a Jewish father and thus had not been regarded as Jewish by others came to Alaska and constructed a completely new Jewish identity after having established contact with the Jewish communities there. Matthew always knew that his father was Jewish but he never knew him personally and was not raised in any religious manner. Growing up he had friends from many

different religions, among which were a group of Jewish friends who often invited him to Jewish festivities. The beginning of his interest in Judaism as a religion was also the beginning of his time in Alaska: “I moved here though and I think it might have been a mixture of things, whether it be disconnected from my Jewish friends back home or the opportunity to reinvent myself... maybe a mixture of the two, when I got here, I wanted something different” (Matthew, Interview 13). Two important aspects are addressed in this quote, one being the disconnection from his Jewish friends: the sudden need to strengthen something that used to be an initial part of his everyday life and that did not need to be manually enhanced or given attention, but that was now gone and therefore needed to actively searched for and reincorporated in his life. The other aspect Matthew addresses in this quote is that being in a place such as Alaska offered the opportunity to reinvent himself implying that being in this place enabled him to rethink his identity in a way it might not have been possible elsewhere. After taking an introductory course into Judaism and experiencing that suddenly “everything makes sense” (Matthew, Interview 13), he also started going to the Reform congregation Beth Sholom, which was an extremely positive experience for him: “It’s been the nicest people I ever met in my entire life. It’s just like so welcoming, (...) At that point was when I said ‘Ok this makes sense and these are my people’ ” (Matthew, Interview 13). He properly converted to Judaism with the help of Rabbi Mitchell, who also supported him in his choice to show his tattoos despite being Jewish and in keeping his parents’ name in the new Hebrew name he received during his conversion process. Brenda of the congregation OrHatzafon in Fairbanks had similar experiences describing that the community is so open that it was easy for her to convert, although completing the actual conversion process was much more difficult due to Fairbanks’ remoteness and lack of a permanent rabbi, and it eventually was necessary for her to put in more effort than other people who convert. Brenda had tried many different religions and was initially Catholic, but when she started doing research on Judaism, for the first time she felt that this was right for her because “there are so many aspects to being Jewish, it’s about who you are, in the face of the rest of humanity. (...) It’s always an evolving state of being” (Brenda, Interview 4). Brenda also informed me that there is a very large number of converts, or ‘Jews by choice’ as she referred to them, in the Jewish community of Fairbanks. Many of the converts I had conversations with stated that their decision to convert to Judaism was mainly driven by their desire to be different, to lead a different lifestyle in contrast to mainstream culture, to be unique. A condition for this to be true, however, is to live in areas with few other Jewish people, as only then will being Jewish be equal to being different from the majority of people.

Therefore, this aspect presents another part of the answer as to how Jewish identity is constructed under conditions of remoteness.

The challenges to be or even become Jewish are numerous in remote areas, mostly due to an absence of 'Jewish infrastructure', including a permanent rabbi and a *mikvah* to complete the conversion process, for instance. Extreme weather conditions and differences in temperature present an additional burden to the execution of some traditional Jewish rituals. In this regard Fairbanks offers the most extreme example in Alaska; while being home to a relatively large Jewish community of about five hundred Jewish people there is no permanent rabbi, and it is difficult to get together the necessary ten adults for a *minyan* for *Shabbat* services. There is also no *mikvah*, and Fairbanks has one of the most extreme weather conditions in the world with temperatures in the summer as high as 33° Celsius and in winter as low as -50° Celsius (Fairbanks 2016). In addition to such challenges that come with remote places in extreme climate zones, there are the social difficulties of being part of a religious minority and finding oneself in need of justifying certain behavior, as can be seen in the example of Matthew's poem, in which he explains to non-Jews why he is never available on Friday nights (see chapter 5.3.4). As already presented in chapter 6.2.2. the Jewish people living in remote areas *have to* think about their Jewish identity, simply because they are continuously challenged to think about it (Alper/Olson 2013: 85). And while this is certainly true for those who were born and raised as Jewish, it is also true for anyone coming to a remote place: when there are few people and little that is known surrounding oneself, one is challenged to reconstruct one's identity, which can sometimes lead to dramatic identity changes. A forgotten or abolished part of one's identity might be rediscovered and expressed in new, individual ways, such as in the case of Lewis. And others may find parts that resonate with their identity they had never found before, simply because they are met by a welcoming group, offering structure and mutual support, such as in the cases of Matthew and Brenda.

The answer as to how Jewish identity is constructed in remote areas is largely found in the fact that there is simply not much else on offer in such areas. For those who have always taken their Jewish identity for granted it may take on a newly found meaning and importance – though not necessarily in the religious sense –, as was also described by Alper and Olson (2013: 82). For those who have had other identities it can provide them with a new frame for their lives, with new meaning, and this is enhanced by the congregations that provide that very frame, which is experienced as welcoming and open. Being part of a group and having

such a frame can prove to be much more crucial and necessary in areas marked by, first and foremost, space and little else, in areas where very few people live and where being encircled by like-minded people becomes something that is not easily achieved. This even applies to the non-Jewish people in Alaska as they are the ones that make up the majority of visitors to the Jewish film festival in Fairbanks each year. There are not many events, so when there is *something*, it is made use of, and this also concurs with Ardener's (2012: 531f.) concept of the 'event-richness' in remote places meaning that every event represents a singularity and thus holds a particular significance. That there is little on offer also concurs with the desire to be different, which for many was a constructing factor in the creation of their Jewish identity. As stated above, this is only the case in areas with few other Jewish people and the absence of a thorough Jewish infrastructure. Only then will it be extraordinary to be Jewish.

Next, I will address the second part of my research question dedicated to how Jewish identity is then maintained in remote areas. Important for the maintenance of Jewish identity in such areas as Alaska is the space it offers for individualized forms of Jewish identity and 'symbolic ethnicity', a voluntary form of identity which enables individuals to decide for themselves in what way they choose to identify as a Jewish person. (Gans 1979: 7ff.) The options for this are numerous. For some this may mean being an active member of a congregation, following most of the religious commandments and attending *Shabbat* services, while for others it may mean taking a Hebrew course, organizing a Jewish film festival or getting a line from the *Torah* as a tattoo. Jewish identity can thus be expressed in ways that still allow for the individual to live their everyday life the way they like. According to Gans (ibid.) any way of expressing one's identity is legitimate as long as it enhances one's experience of identity. Crucial for individualized forms of identity are the surroundings that allow for dynamic identity forms. As argued in chapter 6.1, the diversity among Alaska's population, as well as the space it offers, are vital factors in promoting these individual forms of identity as there are fewer structures determining what is common practice than for example in New York City where one is surrounded by countless other Jewish people who shape one's idea of what it means to be Jewish.

The second crucial aspect as to how Jewish identity can be maintained, in the religious sense, is by the process of altering the commandments. While this is a general, worldwide phenomenon, resulting in the complexity of some of these commandments and the various existing interpretations, I would say this is even more so the case in areas such as Alaska.

Three factors are relevant for this aspect, all of which can be regarded separately. One is the general remoteness: an area's state of being relatively isolated and perceived as 'far away' (to use Lewis' words) from most else. This often, though not always, also comprises the second factor: a relatively low population density. The third factor are an extreme climate and weather conditions, which make living in such areas difficult, not just physically but also psychologically, for instance the lack of light during the long winter periods. By itself, each of these three factors already presents a challenge for a well working (religious) Jewish infrastructure as each of them can heavily influence the possibility of observing the *Torah*'s commandments. To give examples for this, remoteness means that *kosher* products, in particular meat, would have to be imported, which it is often not as most of the time this is not economically viable and lucrative to provide remote areas with such products. A low population density, entailing a small Jewish population, can make it difficult or even impossible to have the mandatory *minyan* for services in the synagogue, which is supposed to be comprised of ten adult men. The extreme weather and climate conditions – in particular in the far North where the presence and absence of light are extreme depending on the season – are especially important for the observance of Jewish holidays such as the weekly *Shabbat*. In Judaism the starting times as well as the duration of holidays depends on sunrise and sunset in the respective region. In the case of Alaska this entails irregularly long or short *Shabbats* for long periods of time, were they observed correctly. As mentioned often in the course of this thesis, Alaska in a way is a unique example, or at least one of very few, as there all three of these factors occur simultaneously, and thus shapes religious Jewish life there to an excessive extent. To take on the aforementioned examples *kosher* meat is either flown in by individuals (from the stricter Orthodox congregation) or hunted (as done by Reform Rabbi Mitchell) although the hunting of *kosher* animals, such as the moose, cannot be considered a *kosher* practice. For meat to be *kosher*, not just the animal needs to be *kosher* but it also has to be slaughtered in accordance with *kosher* rituals. In Fairbanks the congregation has already altered the commandment of the *minyan* from ten men to ten adults, and it is still difficult for them to fulfill this task. And the beginning and duration of *Shabbat* is determined by using Seattle time, not the actual time of each respective place. When referring to the maintenance of a partly religious Jewish identity, this altering of the commandments is thus the most essential mechanism because without it a religious Jewish identity could not be maintained. To repeat what Milton said: "A truly Orthodox Jew would say 'Sorry, why do you live in Alaska?' ", implying that any Jewish person who is truly Orthodox and religiously motivated, cannot live in Alaska without altering and even contravening the commandments.

A third factor contributing to and enabling the maintenance of Jewish identity is a common symbol of group destruction. Gans (1979: 11) suggests that the Holocaust has become this new symbol of group destruction, which now acts as a unifying element for collective Jewish identity worldwide, and I concur with Gans' findings that the Holocaust does present a strong contributing factor to the maintenance of Jewish identity in general, which can be seen in the findings presented in chapter 5.7. However, it is a central argument of mine that a key element for the maintenance of Jewish identity under *extreme* conditions is the threat that exactly these conditions pose. The three factors aforementioned – remoteness, low population (density) and extreme climate and weather conditions – make Alaska one of the most challenging places worldwide to be Jewish. According to Gans the common fear of potential group destruction is needed in order to maintain a collective Jewish identity and continuously strengthen it. This also coincides with both Sartre's and Wexler's notions presented in chapter 2.1.2 that a certain defensiveness (in reaction to a threat) is vital for the maintenance of Jewish identity although they illustrated this using an example of anti-Semitism. (Wexler 2012: 75) (Sartre 1948) I propose that living in Alaska poses a similar threat to Jewish identity and group existence and can therefore be interpreted as a potential element of group destruction. This results in the extreme conditions themselves, as the potentially destroying and threatening element, becoming that what actually helps maintain Jewish identity in Alaska and ultimately strengthens it. The Reismans come to a similar conclusion in their 1995 study on being Jewish in Alaska:

Perhaps the most surprising and significant finding to highlight from the Study of Alaskan Jews is the importance they attach to being Jewish. This, in part, may be attributed to their living on the frontier, where the difficult environment presents a greater adaptive challenge, in psychological and spiritual terms no less than physically. The suggested implication is that the process of coping with such challenges raised their Jewish consciousness. Instinctively, they sensed that in connecting with other Jews and with the wisdom inherent in their religious/cultural heritage, they could cope more effectively with their environment. (Reisman/Reisman 1995: 95)

This threat that the difficult living conditions and extreme climate and environment pose to Jewish identity in Alaska thus not only enhances a general heightened consciousness of being Jewish, but in fact encourages Jewish people to use their Jewish identity, their *collective* Jewish identity, as a coping mechanism for living in this environment. In accordance with the Reismans' conclusion this aspect can also be described as the most significant finding of

my research as it represents a particularity, something that is only true for few places. Finally, a relevant factor contributing to both the construction and the maintenance of Jewish identity in Alaska I have found to be the starting of a family. For many of my informants the raising of children has led them to construct a new, often more religiously motivated form of Jewish identity that they could pass on to their children, which was then maintained by being an active congregation member or ensuring that certain rituals were followed. This resulted in many of my informants suddenly becoming active congregation members and encouraging and supporting their children in the process of preparation for their *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*. An elaboration of this phenomenon is contained in chapter 5.3.5.

Alaska's Jewish communities may only exist due to the altering of commandments, the individualization of Jewish identity and the extreme living conditions, but they have simultaneously succeeded in creating a diverse and unique example of what it can mean to be Jewish. After having my found research topic, I often seen myself confronted with immense surprise regarding the fact that there even were Jewish communities in such remote and rather isolated areas as Alaska. This lack of knowledge, or rather awareness, was equally present amongst both my Jewish and non-Jewish friends and colleagues, and it reminded me of my own reaction after having randomly found out that there was not only a small Jewish community in Alaska but in fact several with different convictions and practices. This surprise initial to most of the reactions I encountered, when speaking to people about my research topic, often entailed a certain curiosity about how it is in fact possible to be Jewish, and not just Jewish but also practicing, in an area such as Alaska. This curiosity is what has driven me to do this research and what has led other people to continually ask me questions about my findings and invite me to present these findings, like for example at the annual Limmud conference – a conference dedicated to different Jewry-related issues – which took place in Vienna in November 2015. And in turn, the people I contacted and then met and interviewed, were open from the very beginning and not just that, but indeed grateful and enthusiastic about a researcher being interested in their lives in the far North. While others faced difficulties in making prior appointments, the persons I contacted went out of their way to make appointments with numerous other people *for* me so that, when I actually arrived in the different research locations, most of the appointments were already fixed. The curiosity in those unfamiliar with the topic and the gratitude and excitement in those who are part of the Jewish communities in Alaska have confirmed that it is important to pay attention to and closely explore the issue of Jewish identity under such conditions, thus shedding light on

what has remained to a large part in the dark so far and giving a voice to those who are rarely heard, and then of course also share these results with a wider audience.

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11.1. List of Interviews

ID	Name	Date	Place
1	Cynthia, Martha, Rebecca, Wanda	May 13, 2015	Anchorage
2	Mitchell, Rebecca	May 14, 2015	Anchorage
3	Mitchell	May 14, 2015	Anchorage
4	Brenda	May 20, 2015	Fairbanks
5	Lewis	May 20, 2015	Fairbanks
6	Milton	May 21, 2015	Fairbanks
7	Lloyd	May 22, 2015	Fairbanks
8	Brenda, Dylan, Jane, Sharon	May 22, 2015	Fairbanks
9	Eleanor, Douglas	May 24, 2015	Valdez
10	Harriet	May 24, 2015	Valdez
11	Louise	May 26, 2015	Anchorage
12	Louise, Mary	May 28, 2015	Anchorage
13	Matthew	May 29, 2015	Anchorage

12. Appendix

12.1. Abstract (English)

The aim of this thesis is to explore Jewish identity under the conditions of remoteness. Focusing on the question of how Jewish identity is constructed and maintained under such conditions, this thesis presents findings regarding the example of the approximately 6,000 Jewish people living in different locations in Alaska, approximately 81% of them in the biggest town of Anchorage. How is Jewish identity constructed in a place as remote as Alaska? How is it then maintained despite the difficulties that come with life in a remote area? And does the Holocaust play a role in its maintenance?

These were the main questions guiding this thesis all based on my research of three weeks at different locations in Alaska in May 2015. Since there is not much literature to be found on this specific topic the presented findings of the case study in Alaska were essential for developing answers to my research questions. These findings are regarded in the light of theories on (collective) identity, (symbolic) ethnicity, Jewish identity, diasporas, remoteness, and the influence of the Holocaust on Jewish identity. The case study contains a portrayal and analysis of a diverse set of aspects that arose during my research exploring the current practices and mindsets of the Jewish communities of Alaska.

Key words: Jewish identity, remoteness, Alaska, identity, collective identity, Jewry, Judaism, Shoah, Holocaust, diaspora, religion

12.2. Abstract (Deutsch)

Das Ziel dieser Masterarbeit ist es, das Zusammenspiel zwischen jüdischer Identität und den extremen Konditionen von geographisch abgeschiedenen Gebieten zu untersuchen. Dabei werden auch andere Faktoren miteinbezogen, welche mit geographischer Abgeschiedenheit zusammenhängen. Der Fokus dieser Arbeit liegt auf der Frage, wie und inwiefern jüdische Identität unter solchen Umständen konstruiert und erhalten wird. Diese Frage wird beantwortet anhand des Beispiels der jüdischen Gemeinden Alaskas, welche insgesamt aus ca. 6.000 Menschen bestehen. 81% dieser 6.000 leben in Alaskas größter Stadt Anchorage. Wie wird jüdische Identität also konstruiert an einem so abgeschiedenen Ort wie Alaska? Wie wird sie erhalten, trotz der Schwierigkeiten, die mit einem Leben in abgeschiedenen Regionen einhergehen? Und spielt der Holocaust eine Rolle im Erhalt dieser jüdischen Identität?

Das sind die Hauptfragen die dieser Masterarbeit zugrunde liegen, basierend auf meiner dreiwöchigen Forschung, welche im Mai 2015 an verschiedenen Orten Alaskas stattfand. Nachdem es nur wenig Literatur zu diesem spezifischen Thema gibt, war eine Feldforschung unerlässlich, um eine Beantwortung dieser Fragen gewährleisten zu können. Die Ergebnisse dieser Forschung werden in der vorliegenden Masterarbeit anhand einer Vielfalt von Theorien beleuchtet. Die Theorien stammen aus den Bereichen (kollektive) Identität, (symbolische) Ethnizität, jüdische Identität, Diaspora und Holocaust. Weiters sind Theorien enthalten, welche sich mit dem Einfluss vom Leben in abgeschiedenen Regionen auf jüdische Identität beschäftigen. Die in der Arbeit enthaltene Fallstudie präsentiert und analysiert diverse Aspekte, welche während meiner Forschung aufkamen und die aktuellen Praxen und Denkweisen der jüdischen Gemeinden Alaskas beleuchten.

Schlagwörter: Identität, Abgelegenheit, Isoliertheit, Alaska, kollektive Identität, Judentum, Shoah, Holocaust, Religion, Diaspora

12.3. Interview Guideline for Semi-Structured Interviews

General questions:

- What is it like being Jewish in Alaska?
- Is your family/Are you originally from Alaska? If not: For how long have you been here? Why did you come here? Was it important for you to know there is a Jewish community here before moving here?
- Are you a member of a congregation? Is it important to you to be a member of a congregation?
- Do you practice Judaism as a religion? Do you observe *Shabbat* or other holidays?
- How often do you participate in events of the Jewish community? To what extent are you a part of the community?
- Did you ever feel threatened or unsafe because you are Jewish?
- Have you ever experienced anti-Semitism in Alaska?
- Are there certain aspects that you think are different in being Jewish in Alaska than elsewhere?
- Do you think non-Jewish Alaskans are aware of the Jewish communities here?
- Do you think that the Holocaust is relevant for Jews in Alaska?

Detailed questions:

- Did you go to a Jewish school?
- Have you ever visited the Jewish museum in Anchorage? What did you think?
- Which aspects of Jewish history are taught in school?
- Which parts of Jewish history are actively remembered by the community?
- Are there any happenings of Jewish history that are commemorated within the community or even the respective city?
- Are there projects/events to commemorate certain happenings that are linked to the Jewish community?
- Is the Holocaust present in everyday narrations in Alaska? In what way?
- What were the key elements you learned about the Holocaust in school?
- Is the commemoration of the Holocaust something that plays a big part within the Jewish community of Alaska and Alaska in general?