Jewish heritage tourism in Bucharest: reality and visions

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This paper was accepted for publication in February 2017

Heritage tourism linked with past or current cultural diversity and ethnic minorities has become a significant part of the tourism industry. This paper contributes to the discussion about heritage management related to niche tourism development and minority group participation. The specific theme of Jewish heritage tourism is analysed, particularly through the case of the present Jewish community of Bucharest. Empirical results are presented and discussed in order to understand how this community and the local tourist sector perceive the tourist potential of its heritage, and envisions its development. A reflection on the discourse behind the current and possible future management of Jewish legacy can thus contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of niche heritage tourism processes in former or present multi-ethnic sites.

KEY WORDS: Romania, heritage tourism, niche tourism, Jewish heritage, participation, Bucharest

Introduction

This paper discusses some of the issues related to niche cultural tourism and heritage management in a former multi-ethnic context. When a dominant group inherits heritage from a fading ethnic minority, issues related to dissonant narratives, participation in decision-making and social sustainability are particularly delicate. The case of Jewish heritage in Bucharest was chosen to contribute to the more general discussion on niche tourism, since Bucharest is a traditionally cosmopolitan city where some of its historical minorities, primarily Jews, have been dramatically reduced by emigration, but have left a considerable cultural legacy and still ask for involvement and participation in the management and promotion of their tangible and intangible heritage. Strategies, practices and discourses by different stakeholders, linked to Jewish heritage production and management, need to be assessed and understood. The still largely unexpressed potential of this niche within the development of tourism in Bucharest, along with early signs of economic and political exploitation of this heritage by non-Jewish stakeholders, makes this case study relevant for the broader theme of sustainable cultural tourism studies.

In the first section of this paper, the theme of niche heritage tourism will be analysed according to existing literature and its trends. After a presentation of the study methods, the case study will be described and analysed in order to illustrate how the Jewish community in Bucharest perceives the critical elements and the economic potential of its cultural heritage, and envisions its development. These will be compared with visions and practices by non-Jewish stakeholders interested in this niche tourism development. The conclusion will reflect on the discourse concerning current and possible future management of Jewish minority heritage, and how this case study contributes to the discussion about the complexity of niche heritage tourism practices in multi-ethnic contexts.

Minority heritage tourism

Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is generally constructed, identified, interpreted and managed in line with a certain scale of values and meanings, and through selection processes linked to present and future political and economic visions and plans (Ashworth et al. 2007; Graham and Howard 2008; Smith 2006). Thus, heritage itself can be seen as the contemporary functional use of this legacy within an existing cultural, social and economic context and according to a certain diachronic representation of local or national identities (Ashworth 2011). The aims of heritage recognition, celebration and promotion are to build or reinforce a certain social system, sustain political power, or bolster tourism development. Heritage, with its artefacts and activities, is continuously
(re)interpreted according to different factors, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, age, gender, education, personal history and political opinions (Ashworth et al. 2007).

Tourists are often attracted by cultural diversity, which incentivises the growth of various tourism products and destinations (Castro et al. 2007; Cohen 2004; Hoffman 2003; Krakover 2012; Ma and Hassink 2013). Some heritage sites are recognised as major tourist attractions of universal significance, while many others tend to attract special interest groups, leading to the creation of niche tourism products (McKercher 2002; Trauer 2006). Niche tourism can be defined as a segmentation of the wider tourism industry into specific and recognisable products (MacLeod 2003; Novelli 2005). According to Robinson and Novelli (2005), this can be seen as a reaction to the phenomenon of globalised mass tourism. The discourse on niche tourism is mainly constructed by the producers of tourism, rather than consumers, as an element of competitive strategy and marketing, in order to diversify the image of a destination and capture new potential markets (Dinis and Krakover 2016; Robinson and Novelli 2005).

Niche tourism marketing can be seen as a specific strategy which chooses to concentrate on a limited market, often with significant purchasing power, and is considered appropriate for small or specialised economic activities or territories (Dinis 2006; Toften and Hammervoll 2009). Current or former multicultural and cosmopolitan contexts, where different national groups made their mark on the landscape and contributed to territorial identity, offer significant opportunities for niche cultural tourism, as certain aspects of this complex heritage can be created, recognised, highlighted, (re)interpreted and ultimately sold in order to diversify the image of the tourist offering, even after previous phases of neglect or destruction (Caffyn and Lutz 1999; Novelli 2005; Poria and Ashworth 2009; Walder et al. 2006). In many cases of tourism development, and especially in niche heritage tourism, the images, meanings, and values attributed to a heritage site are often more decisive than the intrinsic value of the site itself (Poria et al. 2004).

According to Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), heritage is a contemporary interpretation linked to a certain narrative of history. Hence, discordant meanings and representations of the past tend to give space for dissonance and lack of consensus over heritage management, particularly in cases where different cultures maintain different attributions of value. The response of host cultures to dissonant heritage varies from appreciation and tolerance to hostility and disinheritance. While tolerance may generate a range of accommodating behaviours, disinheritance is usually described in forms of emphasis on single-sided narratives, silencing the other cultures’ narrative, neglect, erasure or even destruction of heritage monuments (Graham et al. 2005; Landzelius 2003).

According to Krakover (2016), when a majority group inherits traces of the past or current presence of minorities, three options are possible with regard to their visibility in the tourist image of a specific territory:

1. the minorities’ heritage is silenced or neglected;
2. it is tolerated or authorised as an additional element coexisting with the dominant one;
3. it is incorporated within the local narrative to generate a complex, inclusive and pluralised place identity.

In places where minority cultural heritage has (re)surfaced in recent times, majority groups may react in terms of nationalistic confrontation, or cultural dissonance (Olsen and Timothy 2002; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). However, recent evidence suggests a significant attitudinal shift with respect to the perception, management and promotion of minority heritage from option (1) to options (2) and (3). Besides locally specific political reasons, a generally growing interest in the development of niche tourism products is often one of the driving forces of this ongoing change (Ashworth et al. 2007). Chhabra (2012) showed how institutions dealing with cases of dissonant heritage can successfully engage in participatory practices and promote social inclusion and a shared sense of heritage, identity and belonging.

Dealing with minority heritage tourism, on the political, economic and cultural level, implies a continuous confrontation on the themes of heritage-making, commodification, community participation, social inclusion and the recognition of diversity (Chambra 2005; Lowenthal 1998). A number of internal and external barriers can prevent effective local community and minority group participation in niche tourism development; among them, lack of funds, insufficient knowledge about tourism economics, excessive presence of large investors, and ethnic or social discrimination (Cole 2006; Tosun 2000).

The Jewish niche product in Europe

Jewish heritage tourism is a cultural niche product offered to visitors in many European destinations (Gruber 2002; Krakover 2013). Ashworth (1996) discussed this specific topic in his theory on dissonant heritage, considering dissonance as a frequent and often inalienable attribute of heritage and its management, particularly in Jewish sites associated with violence, atrocities and inter-ethnic clash. Gruber (2002) documented the ‘reinvention’ of Jewish-related sites and narratives in many European urban and rural contexts, focusing on the complex and varied motivations which, both at the local and
the general level, back the rediscovery and reinterpretation of memories and sights which had previously been forgotten or deliberately hidden. Krakover (2016) acknowledged the growth of interest in tangible and intangible Jewish culture, partly overcoming the dissonance theories, and proposed a model of Jewish heritage tourism development in Europe which will be further analysed in this paper.

Since the end of communism in central and eastern Europe, a growing interest in Judaism, Jewish history and culture and the Holocaust has led to their progressive recognition as part of national and local heritage, history and identity, even in countries where Jewish communities have disappeared, or have been reduced to tiny and barely visible minorities. This phenomenon paradoxically coexists with surviving Jewish communities which have missed, or have been opened, in large cities as well as in rural villages in many countries, from Spain to Poland (Gruber 2007; Russo and Romagosa 2010), while Holocaust sites are visited by millions of people every year (Thurnell-Read 2009). Numerous Jewish-style shops, art galleries, restaurants and cafes have been opened, often by non-Jews, and mainly address non-Jewish customers (Gruber 2002).

In the old Jewish districts of Prague and Cracow, which have become mass cultural tourism destinations, the tourist experience is forged not only by visits to synagogues and museums but, even more significantly, by the general atmosphere generated by Jewish-themed festivals and exhibitions, music, souvenir shops, inns and restaurants (Lehrer 2015; Sandri 2013). However, besides this directly opportunistic dimension, the rediscovery of Jewish history and culture is mainly produced by non-Jews, and according to their changeable perception, representation and interpretation. This heritage can be metaphorically viewed and used in discourses related to multiculturalism and hybrid identities, to Nazi crimes or communist denial. It can be reinterpreted as a symbol of survival for oppressed peoples and support for democratic ideals (Tuszyńska 1998; Young 1993). This phenomenon has a strong personal and intimate dimension, but also reverberates onto public policies. In fact, this broad rediscovery of Jewish history and culture, as well as Holocaust-related memories, can be used to re-think and re-define collective histories, representations and narratives, either consciously or unconsciously, supporting a certain image of either a dominant or a minority group (Krakover 2012 2016).

Parallel to these phenomena, mainly related to the recent growth of interest in Jewishness amongst non-Jews, an internal Jewish rediscovery of European roots and heritage has also significantly contributed to the development of this niche tourist segment, particularly since the fall of communism and the rebirth of Jewish life in central and eastern Europe (Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2010).

Within the broader ‘macro-niche’ of cultural tourism, Jewish heritage development in Europe presents unique features, as the sites generally represent the legacy of a minority, which either disappeared, in some cases even centuries ago, or is now represented by small groups of people with high median age and advanced degrees of assimilation (Gruber 2002; Sandri 2013; Smith and Zatori 2015). This implies that Jewish communities are not always able to keep a central role in decision-making related to the management and promotion of their heritage. At the same time, however, Jewish heritage is not always easily understandable by an average non-Jewish visitor or stakeholder, as synagogues are often housed in small and unimposing buildings, and visits to other sites, such as cemeteries, Holocaust memorials and former Jewish streets and districts, require adequate preparation and interpretation (Ioannides and Ioannides 2006; Krakover 2013).

Krakover (2016) suggests a model outlining a general path of progressive development for Jewish heritage sites, which also appears to be applicable to other heritage sites that might resemble the Jewish heritage niche. According to this model, at an early stage, the presence of a well-preserved historical synagogue is usually essential; its recognition, restoration, maintenance and promotion favour the encounter of several stakeholders, including the local Jewish community, public authorities, tourist bodies, international Jewry. At this early stage, visits to the synagogue are usually free or by donation.

As the synagogue enters the cultural tourism circuit, and is listed in best-selling guidebooks and travel websites, regular opening times and institutionalised entrance fees are established, and a Jewish-themed museum is usually opened.

At a more mature stage, other Jewish-related cultural sites, such as side streets, cemeteries, memorials and Hebrew writings, receive recognition and enter the circuit, although the direct revenue generation may be less than that of the synagogues and museums. Promotion of intangible heritage, storytelling, dedicated brochures and maps tend to follow, accompanied by an increasing presence of...
services for Jewish visitors (e.g. kosher shops and restaurants, appropriate accommodation) and for general tourists (e.g. agencies, souvenirs, festivals). In the final stage, the international relevance and recognition of the Jewish heritage in the destination leads to its inclusion in regional and international cultural itineraries and networks.

Overall, considering the past, ongoing and planned practices of revitalisation and commodification of Jewish heritage, both positive and negative aspects can be identified (Corsale and Vutytsk 2015; Gruber 2009). Rampant commercialisation of Jewish-related sites in Poland and Germany raised significant negative reactions in part of the Jewish world (Podoshen and Hunt 2011). At the same time, rehabilitation and revitalisation of Jewish heritage in many European cities have turned decaying and forgotten neighbourhoods into vibrant and cosmopolitan urban spaces (KraKover 2012).

The histories and memories that are resurrected are often reinterpreted, distorted, codified and used in order to suit specific personal, collective, local or national needs. For example, celebrating the multicultural past of cities like Prague, Budapest, Cracow, Vilnius or Lviv is part of a common and widespread post-communist historic narrative stressing the belonging to a mythical ‘Mitteleuropa’ or a ‘Western world’ embedded with tolerance and cultural vivacity (Godis and Nilsson 2016).

Promotion of past Jewish life and culture can thus fulfil cultural demands or suit political strategies, and can also support niche tourism business and ease destination diversification (Dinis 2012; Robinson and Novelli 2005). However, the exploitation of this legacy without the involvement of a living and approving Jewish community may raise serious issues of authenticity, participation and inter-ethnic dialogue. In many cases, small and marginal Jewish communities are expected to become partners in tourism development related to their own culture, but often lack funds and know-how, and may not always share a coherent and unanimously positive view on the tourist option itself. Public authorities or private stakeholders, on the other hand, do not necessarily need the support and involvement of Jewish communities when dealing with this niche tourism segment.

Study methods

In order to investigate both the case study and the more general issues related to Jewish heritage tourism and niche tourism associated with minority groups more fully, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Observations, interviews and secondary sources were the main methods of data collection (Merriam 2002; Patton 2002). The field study was undertaken in June 2016. Direct observations included visits to the main sights related to the Jewish historical and current presence in Bucharest. The author conducted unstructured interviews with key stakeholders from the Jewish community of Bucharest (including the Jewish Community’s headquarters and the staff working at the Choral Temple Synagogue, the Museum of Jewish History and the State Jewish Theatre) and with tour operators and agencies working in this specific tourism segment. The main issues discussed in the interviews were about how the different stakeholders within the Jewish community envision the management and promotion of Jewish heritage for tourism purposes, and how private tourist operators relate to it. A total of 22 interviews was held; each started with a presentation of the author’s research aims, and focused on the interviewees’ visions about strengths, weaknesses and perspectives of Jewish heritage preservation and tourism-related promotion. Interviews were held in Romanian and varied in length from 30 to 60 minutes; they were taped and subsequently transcribed in order to highlight the pertinent excerpts and enable the critical analysis of their content.

The author also consulted secondary sources, including historical and recent statistical data on the demography and the economy of the city, adopting a multidisciplinary approach, in order to better understand the case study context. Brochures, maps and other publications prepared for free distribution by the municipal and national tourism offices were collected in order to detect and evaluate the coverage of the Jewish-related attractions in the printed material. Likewise, this coverage was also examined in the municipal and national official websites, as well as published guidebooks and popular international travel websites1. The collected information enabled comparing the actual presence of references to Jewish heritage in the tourist sources and the perception by the surveyed stakeholders. This allowed understanding of how Jewish tangible and intangible heritage in Bucharest is valued and represented, which permitted interpretation of the discourse behind its management and promotion.

Jewish heritage in Bucharest

The city of Bucharest, despite its turbulent history and periodical outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence, hosted, over the centuries, a numerous, varied and active Jewish community. Starting from the fifteenth century, the economic importance of the city attracted large numbers of foreigners of different origins, which gave the city a traditionally strong cosmopolitan character. The composite background of the Jewish population was evident in its dual organisation, as Sephardic (‘Spanish’) and Ashkenazic (‘Polish’) communities existed and developed in parallel. The Ashkenazic element grew larger than the Sephardic one and, during the second half of the nineteenth century, further split into an orthodox community, centred around the Great Synagogue (built in 1847) and a
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modemist one, which built the Choral Temple (1867). Yiddish and Ladino were widely spoken by the two communities, with Romanian being increasingly spoken as a first language (Iancu 1996; Waldman and Ciuciu 2011).

The Jewish population of Bucharest grew significantly, particularly through constant immigration inflows, from 2600 people in 1835 (4.3% of the total population) to 76,480 in 1930 (12% of the total population). The south-eastern districts of Văcărești and Dudești were the heart of the religious and communal life, but Jews settled in all central districts of the city, especially in areas of intense economic growth, and were active in many fields, including commerce and trade, industry, finance, medicine and arts. The main commercial streets and avenues of Bucharest hosted a large number of Jewish-owned shops and companies, as well as religious, cultural, educational and social institutions (Streja and Schwarz 2009).

The community made its mark on the city’s urban landscape, spreading a taste for eclectic, art nouveau, art deco, rationalist and modernist architectural styles (Figure 1a). During the interwar period, Jewish literature and arts flourished thanks to intellectuals such as Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu (Waldmann and Ciuciu 2011).

However, antisemitism was a constant threat and violent agitations were frequent. In January 1941, during the rebellion of the far-right Legionary Movement, over 120 Jews were killed in a devastating assault (‘pogrom’) that hit the core of the Jewish district and damaged or destroyed several synagogues, homes, shops and communal buildings. In September 1942, approximately 600 Jews were deported to the eastern region of Transnistria, but large-scale deportations were soon stopped by the amiable military regime of Ion Antonescu, and the vast majority of Bucharest’s large Jewish community survived the war and the Holocaust (Wiesel 2004).

Shortly after World War II, Bucharest experienced a massive inflow of Jewish refugees coming from former concentration camps and from several areas of Romania and Moldova. The city’s Jewish population peaked at 150,000 in 1947 (15% of the total population). Under the communist regime, in spite of the suppression of many Jewish social and religious institutions, Bucharest continued to be the centre of Romania’s Jewish communal and cultural life, constantly trying to cope with the unpredictable dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu. A State Jewish Theatre was founded in 1948 and served as a key cultural reference for the community. Emigration to Israel, however, drastically reduced the number of Jews in Bucharest during the second half of the twentieth century. According to the latest census, by 2011 there were only 1333 Jewish people left, although estimates by the community’s institutions still count around 4000, including partly Jewish descendants and partially assimilated people. There is no significant residential concentration in the former Jewish district anymore, but Jewish communal life still revolves around the area and currently focuses mainly on two functioning synagogues, the institutional administration, a multifunctional community centre, a theatre, a school and the minority’s media.

Jewish heritage in Bucharest suffered significant destruction during the last years of Ceausescu’s regime, when a large part of the old Jewish district was demolished, as part of the notorious urban renewal plan called ‘Sistematizare’, and was replaced with wide avenues, standardised apartment blocks and empty spaces. Several temples and synagogues disappeared, including the old Sephardic Spanish temple, along with the characteristic eclectic architecture of the area, and its inns, houses, gardens, cobblestone streets and atmosphere (Leahu 1995; Streja and Schwarz 2009). Three of the main synagogues, with their lavish neoclassical and Moorish Revival architecture, were spared, together with the building of the State Jewish Theatre; these now look stranded among communist blocks and barren areas (Figure 1b).

In the surrounding districts, however, many winding streets with tree-shaded old houses survived the destruction, in spite of their often neglected and decaying state, and valuable buildings once designed or decorated by Jewish architects and artists are spread across the city. The large Sephardic and Ashkenazi cemeteries also survived to the present day, although in a semi-abandoned state. RAMPANT overbuilding is now quickly filling the underdeveloped areas within the district. Several surrounding districts, with their old bourgeois houses now seriously decaying, are inhabited by very poor families, often of Roma ethnicity, who obtained or occupied them when Jews left (Figure 1c). As there is no overall protection for the city’s historic urban landscape, many pre-war houses are still being demolished every year in the area, and replaced by standardised new buildings. A large memorial monument dedicated to the victims of the pogrom and deportations was recently built by the government in a barely visible area out of the Jewish district, with little involvement of the community, and currently appears overshadowed and forgotten by both visitorS and locals.

Thus, tangible heritage shows elements of both cultural and architectural flourishing as well as neglect and destruction. Intangible heritage, on the other hand, traces its roots back to a rich tradition which includes literature, music, traditions, folklore, food, etc., but has been dramatically undermined by mass emigration to Israel and the United States, and the subsequent fading of the formerly unique Romanian-Jewish identity. Yet, in spite of the currently chaotic and shabby look of the formerly picturesque Jewish district, its rich history and memories, as well as the architectural and cultural jewels it still contains, are clearly recognisable tourism assets (Gruber 2007;
The Jewish community of Bucharest, although weakened by emigration, assimilation, ageing and financial hardship, still manages three remaining synagogues, one of which still functions, while two host Jewish museums. These buildings have recently been restored with mixed public and private funds (Figure 1d); a fourth synagogue, located outside the former Jewish area, was recently renovated and acquired by the Hasidic Orthodox community and is almost exclusively managed by that group. The management of the synagogues is a significant financial challenge for this tiny and largely impoverished community. No funds are available for the restoration and maintenance of the cemeteries and the remaining ruins of other synagogues and temples. There are no kosher grocery stores or regularly open restaurants, which hampers their profitability. No Jewish-related objects or souvenirs are regularly sold in any of the venues, with the exception of locally printed books, mostly in Romanian and some in English or Hebrew, intermittently displayed in the internal offices of the communal institutions.

The voice of the stakeholders

Jewish stakeholders were interviewed in order to understand their perception and visions about the weaknesses and perspectives of Jewish heritage management and tourist promotion. Although possibly biased, the results showed considerable awareness of the cultural and economic potential of this heritage, but also deeply rooted distrust in political strategies, and pessimism about the capability of this dwindling community to benefit from the eventual large-scale development of Jewish heritage tourism. Showing a pragmatic approach,
none of the interviewees views the presence of private non-Jewish operators in negative terms, and the level of collaboration and understanding with the non-Jewish guides and tour operators is generally good.

According to the interviewed staff from the Choral Temple and the Great Synagogue, both sights currently host significant flows of Jewish tourists, particularly Israelis, including former Romanian Jews; the number of non-Jewish visitors is modest but steadily growing, while local Romanian visitors are rare. The main concern for the future management of the sites is the tiny and decreasing size of the community.

The interviewed administrator of the Federation of the Jewish Communities of Romania, based in Bucharest, advocates keeping a central role in the development of Jewish heritage tourism in the city, and proposed a partial reconstruction of the former Jewish district, in the remaining empty areas, indicating the cases of Prague and Cracow as successful models. Tourism is viewed as a major economic opportunity, particularly for the younger elements of the community. However, serious pessimism is caused, again, by the ever-reducing size of the community itself, as well as the lack of internal funds and the weak interest shown by both public and private stakeholders. The poor state of the remaining old houses and the rampant building of new blocks are seen by the Federation as serious threats for the historical and cultural significance of the former Jewish district, and obstacles for its tourist development, but the community has no means to influence the urban planning or social evolution of the district.

Staff of the Jewish Community Centre confirmed these views, adding that the cultural life of the community, in spite of its reduced size, is still active and diverse, and several events have been organised over the years for the Romanian population in order to revive interest in and knowledge about the Jewish world, including music and food venues. Cultural exchanges have also involved other historical minorities living in the city, such as Roma and Armenians. The cost of these events, however, is significant and the community can hardly cover them with sufficient regularity.

The head of the ‘Center for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism in Romania’, a local NGO, also showed awareness of the tourist and cultural potential of Jewish heritage in Bucharest, and works on several projects to foster it, including the digitisation of cemetery records to support genealogical tourism, and multimedia applications to highlight Jewish-related buildings and sights spread across the historical districts of the city. However, according to this interviewee, lack of public interest and inactivity, and fragmentation within the Jewish community itself, critically hampered the implementation of these projects. Moreover, Bucharest is not generally perceived as a cultural tourism destination, and the memory of the ancient Jewish presence is largely lost among the Romanian people.

The State Jewish Theatre is still formally a significant element of the Jewish identity in Bucharest, but, following the emigration and ageing of the community, its staff and audience are now mainly non-Jewish. It is managed according to the national law on ethnic and linguistic minorities, thus all the plays must have a connection to Jewish culture, and at least 25% of them must be in Yiddish, making it the last regular Yiddish theatre in Europe. The theatre’s ateliers host a wide collection of costumes, sceneries, texts and posters which could easily fill a museum, but the interviewed staff indicated lack of funds, weak interest from the institutions and the rundown state of the surrounding area, widely demolished during Ceausescu’s years, as key issues. The theatre ultimately aims to renovate its cultural offering and to introduce plays in foreign languages, in order to attract new local and international audiences.

Other interviewed Jewish stakeholders, such as the Centre for the History of Romanian Jewry, the Museum of the History of the Romanian Jewish Community, located in the former United Holy Temple, the Memorial Museum of Jewish Martyrs, located in the Great Synagogue, and the Bucharest Klezmer Band (the only Jewish folk music players in the city), all showed scepticism about the future of the old Jewish district but showed confidence in a slowly but steadily growing interest in Jewish culture and history within the Romanian population.

Given the overall modest attention shown by governmental tourist offices, private entrepreneurs have autonomously started promoting Jewish heritage tourism. Four interviewed operators, organising Jewish-themed guided tours in Bucharest, deal with significant numbers of visitors, particularly Israeli and American Jews, followed by non-Jewish tourists; Romanian visitors are however rare. According to the interviewees, one of the main difficulties in developing this segment is the dilapidated look of the old Jewish district, caused by the demolition ordered by Ceausescu and subsequent neglect. It is so difficult for foreign tourists to imagine how the area used to look, that some tour operators feel compelled to carry old pre-demolition pictures, and take visitors to neighbouring surviving old streets to recall the lost atmosphere of the district. The three oldest synagogues and the theatre are usually included in the tours. Some of them also add the Hasidic Orthodox synagogue and at least one of the two main Jewish cemeteries, according to the customers’ interests, and can extend the tour to other Jewish sights out of Bucharest, including Transylvania and Moldavia. The Holocaust memorial is usually skipped by all of them because of its remote location and its widely perceived unattractiveness.

The Jewish sights, including the cemeteries, are cited in most guidebooks, such as the Lonely Planet,
Rough Guide, National Geographic and In Your Pocket, as well as travel websites (TripAdvisor, VirtualTourist) and in the national tourism website (http://romaniatourism.com/jewish-heritage.html#Bucharest), but there is still no dedicated municipal tourism website. The presence of Jewish history and heritage in the brochures, printed materials and websites run by the city’s and county’s tourist authorities is sporadic and marginal, generally citing the Choral Temple and the Museum only. This may show a persisting underestimation of this potential by Romanian authorities.

A pilot project of digitisation and promotion of Jewish heritage, also for tourism purposes, was funded by the Romanian government and implemented by the University of Cluj-Napoca, the Spiru Haret University of Bucharest and the National Institute of Historical Monuments, under the direction of Professor Mircea Sergiu Moldovan, between 2008 and 2011 (JEWISH-ROM). Two prototypes of digital geo-referenced and Jewish-themed cultural trails were proposed for Bucharest, one covering 18 existing and former synagogues and the other including 19 interwar buildings designed by Dada architect Marcel Iancu. However, no further trails have been recorded since.

According to both Jewish and non-Jewish interviewees, the old antisemitism, which used to be deeply rooted in the Romanian society, is now largely gone and is replaced by widespread indifference. Jewish heritage tourism in Bucharest is now generally considered, by all the interviewed stakeholders, as an important economic opportunity in order to diversify the image of the city, reinforce its cultural attractiveness and spread benefits to some of its marginal districts. However, the current shabby and unfinished state of the old Jewish neighbourhood, the lack of landscape-attentive urban planning, and the scarce governmental support are widely indicated as serious weaknesses. Different histories, traditions and visions by different stakeholders within the community also prevent the elaboration of shared proposals. Both Jewish and non-Jewish interviewees tended to make common cause criticising public institutions for their inactivity and complaining about the weak knowledge and interest by the Romanian population for this part of the country’s history.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Jewish heritage sites in Europe, after several episodes of violent destruction and prolonged neglect, are often characterised by their small non-monumental scale, enriched by intangible memories and historical significance. These characteristics tend to appeal to special interest groups of tourists who have some links with, or at least curiosity about, Jewish culture. However, Jewish sites are now often managed and promoted by groups and cultures foreign to the Jewish faith, which raises questions on authenticity and participation (Howard and Allen 2005; Murzyn 2008). The development of this niche heritage may cause phenomena of dissonance with regard to the present-day majority, who might not necessarily perceive its relevance, value and potential (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996).

At present, most foreign tourists in Bucharest are unaware of the city’s Jewish cultural resources and, because of the diminished visibility of Jewish sights, as well as the small size of the community, this heritage may also be unknown to many local residents and domestic visitors.

According to the model proposed by Krakover (2016) for Jewish heritage tourism development in former communist countries, Bucharest shows discordant signs. The first stage in this model, corresponding to the restoration of the historical synagogues and their rise to the level of significant and appreciated tourist attractions, and involving a wide array of stakeholders including the Jewish community, public bodies and private tour operators, has been accomplished.

The later stages, instead, are still far away. In fact, other sights are essentially abandoned, such as the cemeteries and minor synagogues, while the theatre’s building and collections are not currently open to the general public. Moreover, the old district, destroyed under Ceaușescu, currently presents a rather unattractive or undeveloped face, with no clear and shared plans for its rehabilitation. The speculative overbuilding which is starting to take place in the area, encountering little opposition from Romanian civil society, shows the widespread lack of consideration for the cultural and tourist potential of the district, and critically undermines the potential for restoration of the historic look of the area envisioned by the headquarters of the Jewish community. The memory and sites of Jewish presence in the rest of the city, including the bourgeois architecture that still marks many central avenues and streets, remain largely unrecognised. Intangible heritage, including literature, music and food, is only seldom given tourist value. The lack of services for Jewish visitors (such as kosher food and restaurants and religious-friendly hotels) and for non-Jews alike (souvenirs, maps, brochures) is a considerable sign of weakness. Hence, Jewish Bucharest would not easily fit into a regional itinerary for an average tourist interested in Jewish heritage in central-eastern Europe, unlike Warsaw, Cracow, Vilnius, Prague or Budapest.

According to the survey, Jewish stakeholders are aware of both the weaknesses and the potential, but lack the necessary resources and expertise to engage in profitable tourist business. The Jewish museums still need an upgrade from their rather traditional models into new formulas able to attract a wider public, while the Jewish State Theatre is starting to move gradually in that direction. At the same time, non-Jewish stakeholders, in particular specialised tour guides,
mainly working as individuals, have already started developing this segment, offering both standardised tours to the most visible sights and more tailored proposals, also reaching towards other cities and regions of Romania. A national-level Jewish itinerary, sketched by the national tourism office but not subsequently developed, has been manifest through private initiatives, principally destined for Jewish visitors.

During the interviews with Jewish community leaders and non-Jewish private tourism operators, practically all opinions voiced by interviewees noted and lamented the lack of significant financial support from public authorities and institutions. Nevertheless, governmental support has been provided through the restitution of Jewish public properties, financial aid for restoration, and protection of some of the sights as national monuments. Moreover, the Municipality recently announced the creation of a Holocaust museum in the heart of the old town, in the popular pedestrian area of Lipsca, one of the few districts which have preserved the pre-war architecture almost intact. On this occasion, in local media, Berlin, Warsaw and Moscow were cited by the authorities as successful examples of similar museums. Hence, some of the negative opinions given by the interviewees about the indifference and inactivity of some of the negative opinions given by the successful examples of similar museums. Hence, some of the negative opinions given by the interviewees about the indifference and inactivity of public institutions might be excessively biased.

Given this evidence, the case of Bucharest shows a situation where a significant legacy of a minority group, strictly linked with some of the key events of Romanian history, including dark and controversial memories linked with fascist and communist regimes, is now basically a marginal part of the city’s image. In spite of the appreciation shown by some visitors, and the growth of some small local non-Jewish businesses already taking advantage of the niche tourism opportunities, the potential remains largely undeveloped.

Considering the example of cities of comparable importance, which, according to Krakover’s model, have already attained the more advanced stages in niche heritage tourism development, such as Prague, Cracow, Budapest and Sarajevo, stronger and more synergistic efforts would help to increase the visibility of the community and restart some of the lost services, such as kosher food availability. However, the weak position of the local Jewish community, in terms of its dramatically reduced size, wealth and influence, and the individual-focused scale of the current specialised private tour operators, may also easily lead, eventually, to the encroachment of more aggressive and exploitative approaches, alien to the local community itself, raising issues of long-term social and cultural sustainability. Moreover, the still relatively widespread domestic negation of Romania’s responsibilities in the Holocaust and the nationalistic celebration of some of the controversial figures of its history, such as Antonescu, might lead to a biased and distorted interpretation, representation and narrative (Wiesel et al. 2004).

The opinions of non-Jewish residents about Jewish heritage tourism, and a possible revival of the local Jewish identity, require further study. According to Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), residents belonging to currently dominant groups, and not involved in the tourism business, may develop feelings of hostility and cultural dissonance confronting the revival of a minority heritage. However, Ashworth (2003) also recorded mainly positive reactions where Jewish memories and sights became part of a city’s recognised multicultural history and identity, and a solid tourist asset.

Considering the general theoretical framework, and according to the empirical evidence, interviewed stakeholders tend to advocate a small-scale approach, relying on a good collaboration among the surviving Jewish community and the non-Jewish guides working in this segment, and envisioning a continued autonomous control of heritage management by the Jewish community itself. At the same time, the awareness of the weaknesses caused by the dwindling size of the community, and the complaints about the indifference showed by most Romanians, are accompanied by an open distrust toward public authorities. It could be argued that a significant growth of this niche tourism, and its structural integration into the city’s image and offering, might indeed carry the intrinsic risk of more powerful stakeholders taking control of it. The cases of Prague or Cracow, often seen as successful models, actually confirm that, when Jewish heritage becomes a mass tourism attraction, this is not always run by the Jewish communities themselves (Gruber 2002).

With each case being placed in a different social, economic, political and cultural environment, but with comparable mechanisms of dissonance or inclusion, further exploration of the issue of minority heritage tourism niches will enrich the discussion on cultural diversity in contemporary societies.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Editor and the reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. Thanks also to the Jewish community of Bucharest, particularly to Gilbert Şaim, and to the other people working for the preservation and promotion of Jewish heritage in Bucharest, in particular Eduard Popescu and Marcel Draghici, for their precious collaboration.

Note

1 Websites (accessed 5 February 2017): http://antisemitism.ro (Center for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism in Romania); http://teatrul-evreiesc.com.ro (State Jewish Theatre); www.inshr-ew.ro (Elie Wiesel’ National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania); www.jcc.ro (Jewish Community...
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Centre – Bucharest; www.jewished.ro (Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania); www.jewish-romania.ro (Project JEWISH-ROM); www.romania.travel/special-interest/jewish-heritage (Romanian National Tourism Authority); www.ushmm.org/research/scholarly-presentations/symposia/holocaust-in-romania/romania-facing-its-past (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

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