A summer day in the city, two young couples out for a walk: One of the women is pushing a stroller with her young son; relaxed, they smile at the photographer. The women are elegantly dressed, their hats stylishly tilted, the men in suits. Yet although they are out on a city street, the couples seem strangely isolated, the sidewalk around them empty. It is almost as if they are not fully a part of the city’s bustling life. Indeed, this is no ordinary summer and these are no ordinary couples. It is June 1943 in Prague, and the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia is in its fifth year. The two men, marked as Jews by the Stars of David on their chests, their “Aryan” wives, and their children belong to an ever-shrinking society of intermarried Jewish-Christian families in the city. By May 1945, less than three percent of the prewar Jewish population in the Bohemian Lands had managed to avoid deportation and/or ghettoization. These “last Jews” consisted almost entirely of intermarried Jews and their young children.

The couple on the right in the photograph are my grandparents, Věra and Ladislav Lichtenstein. The child in the stroller is my father, Jiří. Their friends are the Eisners. Along with my grandparents, they were part of a community of intermarried families whose very existence violated the boundaries of the strictly segregated Jewish and “Aryan” societies. Their marriage simultaneously condemned them to a life of isolation and denigration and allowed them to assume a position of relative privilege, protected from some of the harshest anti-Jewish measures, most significantly deportation. Holocaust scholars have paid some attention to the divergent fates of intermarried couples, but we know very little about the lives and experiences of these families in the 20th century. This is in part because intermarried couples do not fit neatly within the categories of “Jewish” and “non-Jewish,” and hence fall
outside the national and ethnic meta-narratives employed by scholars. The void, however, also reflects the fact that many scholars, much like religious and lay activists, have internalized the notion that intermarriage denotes an individual’s rejection of Jewishness and the Jewish community. It betrays the belief that Jews who intermarry no longer belong within the realm of Jewish history.

Beginning in the early 20th century, Jewish social scientists made intermarriage and fertility—particularly the notion that intermarried Jews and their children were lost to the community—the focal points for discourses of decline, a trend that only gained strength in the wake of the Holocaust. Although scholars have reclaimed such “lost” individuals as Jews if they achieved a certain level of fame (or notoriety), much less is known about the experiences of ordinary women and men. It is only with the more recent focus on the multiplicity and fluid nature of identities that people otherwise relegated to the margins of the Jewish experience are reentering the story.

At the Frankel Institute I have worked on a project that looks at the experiences of intermarried families in the Bohemian Lands (today’s Czech Republic) from 1900 to 1960. For Jews, this was a time of great social and cultural prosperity as well as deepening integration. But it was an era that culminated in years of unprecedented persecution and destruction. It was also a time when thousands of Jews married non-Jews. My interest in this topic stems not only from my own family history, but also from a discovery I made while researching the life and work of the prominent Prague Zionist František Friedmann (1897–1945).

Friedmann was a Zionist politician and social scientist devoted to creating a flourishing Jewish national community in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and ’30s. Unlike most of his Zionist colleagues, who either fled abroad or were murdered by the Germans, Friedmann was still living in Prague when the war ended in early May 1945. What had saved Friedmann and his children was his wife of more than 15 years, the “Aryan” Hana Friedmannová. During six years of German rule, she stood by her husband despite the hardship and ostracization her choice entailed. Their marriage allowed Friedmann to continue his work as a Jewish community leader—although now under radically different conditions—and, for some time, to protect his elderly parents from deportation. Having studied Friedmann’s prewar Zionist activism, I was intrigued by his residency card’s revelation of what appeared to be a contradiction between his political and private worlds. It demonstrated that a microhistory of intermarried families, such as the Friedmanns, not only challenges narratives about intermarriage as a path to and choice of assimilation, but also allows for a better view of the drama and unpredictability, the coincidences, twists, and turns that shape people’s lives.

František Friedmann had been a leading figure in Prague’s Zionist community. He made his name as a specialist in Jewish sociology and as an editor of the main Czech-language Zionist weekly, Jewish News (Židovské zprávy). A gifted and popular speaker with wide-ranging interests, Friedmann represented the Zionist Jewish Party on Prague’s Municipal Council for almost a decade, a position that carried significant prestige and influence. In August 1929, a few months before he became an elected official, Friedmann married Hana Silvanová, a non-Jewish Prague native. The couple moved into an apartment in the upscale Vinohrady neighborhood, home to many Prague Jews. The couple’s two children, Mirjam and Karel, were members of the Jewish community, although Hana remained a Catholic.

In those years, the dominant political and scholarly circles to which Friedmann
aspired treated the transgression of ethnic and religious boundaries with suspicion. Czech and German nationalist pedagogues debated the moral pathology of children from bilingual households, and some Jewish demographers cited the low birth rates of Jewish-Christian couples as evidence for the natural incompatibility of such unions. In a multiethnic society, such as interwar Czechoslovakia, where people of different ethno-national backgrounds studied, worked, lived, and played together, Zionists and other nationalists were especially anxious about upholding ethnic boundaries. They did so by casting endogamy as morally superior to intermarriage, often depicted as a form of ethnic defection or treason. This unease about mixing among his peers, however, did not deter Friedmann from marrying Hana just as his political star was rising.

In terms of his Zionist career, Friedmann’s marriage did prove to be his Achilles’ heel. Yet he did not act as if there was dissonance between his nationalism and his marriage. Indeed, Friedmann’s entire public persona revolved around the creation of a solid foundation for Jewish national life in Czechoslovakia, a distinct feature of Zionism here. In his sociological work, he argued that intermarriage, an ever-more common phenomenon in those years, did not threaten the continuity of Jewish life as long as these couples chose to raise their children as Jews, much as the Friedmanns did. Some of his Zionist colleagues did not agree. In 1931, Friedmann was sidelined by his archrival Angelo Goldstein for the position as the leading Zionist voice in the country. As Viktor Fischl, then a young Zionist insider, remembered, a person who so publicly transgressed religious and cultural norms “was simply not acceptable” as a Zionist representative.

Despite this political defeat, however, Friedmann continued to play an important role in Jewish and Zionist life in Prague in the 1930s. When the German occupation began, Friedmann was among those Jewish leaders who sought to meet the barrage of demands hurled at them by the new authorities and desperate Jews. By 1943, Friedmann had seen most of his colleagues deported. He, along with a handful of other intermarried Jews, remained to oversee what was left of Jewish society in the Bohemian Lands. Although Friedmann’s example is particular, it is not unique. It is a historical irony that in Czechoslovakia intermarried Jews, once dismissed as defectors or traitors to their race, ended up as custodians of Jewish culture and heritage in the wake of the Holocaust.