

A History of the Jews in Prague

IN THE BEGINNING

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In the 1970s, schoolchildren in Czechoslovakia were taught that as far back as the year 965, an itinerant Arab merchant recorded the existence of the city of Prague to the outside world.

Two things were left out of the lesson. First, the merchant, Ibrahim ibn Jakub, was an Arabian Jew. Second, ibn Jakub recorded the existence not only of the city itself, but also of Jewish merchants in Prague markets. From this we know that Jews had a part in Prague city life from its earliest origins.

According to one legend, when Prague's Founding Mother Libuse prophesied the establishment of the city, she had a vision that her descendants would encounter a nation from a faraway country, with a religion different from their own. Only if this nation was received in peace would Prague be blessed with prosperity. Sure enough, when the settlement around the Castle District was established, the Czechs welcomed the Jews to settle just below it.

There is some truth to the legend: There used to be a Jewish settlement in the Ujezd district of Mala Strana, comfortably located in the shadow of the Castle. In fact, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, Jewish settlements sprang up around all the major markets and trade routes of Prague: near the Castle, beneath the twelfth-century Castle at Vysehrad, and in the area of today's "Jewish Town." From the thirteenth century, there was even a Jewish cemetery in the New Town (Nove Mesto). Far from being confined to a single space, it is clear that at least in their early history, the Jews of Prague were free to settle in all the main districts of Prague.

Eventually, of course, the Jewish settlement in the Old Town gained ascendancy over the others. In another legend, it is said that the Jewish Town became the single Jewish settlement in Prague out of the twisted machinations of the First Crusade of 1096. The story has it that the Crusaders destroyed the Jewish settlements in Mala Strana and Vysehrad, but left the third settlement untouched. Apparently they feared that fires from the Jewish buildings would leap over and burn down the precious churches of the Old Town. In fact, although the Vysehrad settlement probably was destroyed during the pogroms of 1096, a settlement in Mala Strana continued into the twelfth century. Eventually, this settlement succumbed to the dominance of the Jewish Community located in the Old Town.

Even the "Jewish Town" in the Old Town did not begin as a single entity but evolved in three districts. One settlement, possibly the oldest, centered around the twelfth-century Altschul, on the spot where the Spanish Synagogue stands today.

Some contend that the Altschul settlement was home to Byzantine Jews who practiced the Sephardic rite. Another settlement arose by the banks of the river, where the Pinchas Synagogue was later built. This settlement stretched into the general area of today's Siroka Street, and was the commercial core of the Jewish Town. Finally, Jews settled the area around the Altneuschul and completed the tripartite Jewish settlement in the Old Town. Meanwhile, King Vaclav I created the Old Town as an official entity in the 1230s, including the Jewish Quarter within its walls. The Old Town became the main trade center of Prague, attracting merchants and craftsmen from throughout the region. The growth of the urban center was mirrored in the Jewish Town. By the end of the thirteenth century, the settlements by the Altneuschul and the later Pinchas Synagogue fused together, separated from the Altschul Community by Christian homes. The district of the Altschul eventually evolved into a mini-ghetto, since it was severed from the main area of the Jewish Town. A series of rules were later promulgated regarding the times and conditions Jews were permitted to pass from the large settlement to the smaller one. Within the larger area of the Jewish Town, it was the district of the Altneuschul that soon assumed chief importance as the spiritual, cultural, economic, and administrative center of the Jews.

The earliest stars in the constellation of Prague Jewish scholars appeared at this time. In the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Jewish Community was headed by Abraham ben Azriel, whose well-known work is *Arugat Ha'Bosem* ("The Garden Bed of Spices"). His pupil was Isaac ben Moses (c. 1180-1250), who passed his time in the Rhineland but always came back to Prague. He was known as the *Or Zaru'ab* ("The Sown Light") after the title of his most famous work, a commentary on the Talmud. From the writings of these men, which occasionally lapsed into Czech (written in Hebrew letters) to explain complicated concepts, we know that from at least the thirteenth century the Jews of Bohemia conversed in a Slavonic language.

SERVI CAMERAE REGIAE

As was the case throughout Europe, the position of Prague's Jews deteriorated considerably in the early thirteenth century. The year 1215 marked the convention of the Fourth Lateran Council hosted by Pope Innocent III. The Council decided that as punishment for the sin of Deicide, Jews were to be separated from Christian society and forced into a state of squalor. Almost all the anti-Semitic decrees that were used to persecute the Jews for over six hundred years were promulgated at this time. These included the prohibition from owning land, prohibitions from living among Christians, and exclusion from guilds and from public office. Jews were forced to wear identifying marks on their clothing, originally to help Christians avoid

having sexual intercourse with them. Because Christians perceived money lending as usury, Jews were channelled into this profession, but the Council restricted the amount of interest Jews were permitted to charge. The theological basis for these laws was the collective guilt of the Jews, but on a propagandistic level the inferior Jewish status was designed to be a permanent reminder to Christians of God's wrath toward those who stray from Jesus. In Prague, what this meant was that the Jewish Town, which had been considered a section of the Old Town, was increasingly isolated from Christian parts of the city. In the span of roughly two centuries, the Jewish Town slowly evolved into an enclosed ghetto.

The laws of the Fourth Lateran Council posed a quandary for the kings of Europe. Because the Jews were almost totally disenfranchised from society, they could not pay taxes thorough the normal channels of the feudal system. In response to this, kings established royal charters with their Jewish communities, primarily to collect taxes from the Jews but also to install the Jews as the king's moneylenders or tax collectors. Jews were labelled *servi camerae regiae*, or "servants of the royal chamber," and granted numerous privileges and protection.

Following the model of Hungarian King Bela IV's Jewish laws of 1251, King Premysl Otakar II issued his Royal Charter for the Jews in 1254. The charter contained the usual business legalisms: The Jews were protected as money lenders and as servants of the king, and were required to pay high taxes as well as supply occasional loans to the royal treasury. But even more importantly in the face of increasing Christian anti-Semitism, the Royal Charter protected the Jews from persecution. It refuted the blood libel attack on the Jews; prohibited violence against Jews, their property, synagogues, and cemeteries; and outlawed all forced baptisms in the kingdom. The church was dismayed at this infringement on its jurisdiction, and issued complaints against King Otakar II. The king responded that the Jews, as official servants of his treasury, fell under his control and protection. Thus began a centuries-long balancing act between the castle's exploitation of Jewish finances, and the church's campaign against what it called "Jewish perfidy."

As a direct result of the Royal Charter, the Jewish Town became an autonomous district where Jews were permitted to govern most of their internal matters. The religious freedoms granted in the charter led to a flourishing of Jewish life, and settlement increased in the Jewish Town. The prosperity can be seen no better than in the building of the Altneuschul in about 1270. Jewish spiritual, cultural, and political life soon became centered around the twin-naved synagogue, which from the thirteenth century until today has served as the unifying symbol for all the Jews of Bohemia.

OPPRESSION IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Jewish life in Medieval Europe was never unequivocally good or bad for a long period of time. It was more like a roller coaster of fortune: sweeping privileges alternated with severe restriction, pogrom, and exile - sometimes in a matter of decades. Thus it was that after Jewish religious and economic privileges were strengthened during the middle of the thirteenth century, by the end of the century the Jewish Community had entered a period of instability. In 1296, King Vaclav II thought up the foolproof fundraising scheme of capturing Jews and holding them for ransom. John of Luxembourg and Vaclav IV followed suit in a similar fashion, actually arresting the leaders of the Jewish Community on a whim. King Charles IV, who endeared himself to the Jews with the banner he granted them in 1357, borrowed the Hungarian royal custom of cancelling all debts owed to Jews in order to appease the estates. Kings Charles IV and Vaclav IV allowed themselves to be heavily bribed by the nobility in return for such favors against the Jews. One of the most prominent Jews in Prague at the time was a man by the name of Lazar. In recognition of Lazar's frequent loans to the royal treasury, he was given a tax amnesty in the years 1350 to 1352. The greatest mark of Lazar's influence, however, was his privilege of living outside the Jewish Town. From this we learn that in the fourteenth century the ghetto enclosure was not as strictly enforced as it was in later periods. After the death of Lazar, Charles IV claimed his home for one of the first sites of Charles University, the oldest university in Central Europe.

At the same time, religious anti-Semitism found fertile ground in fourteenth-century Bohemia after having been nurtured in the churches of Germany for several decades. Christian superstitions of the Blood Libel and the Desecration of the Host, in which Jews were accused of ritual murder and insidious plots against the Christian religion, became embedded in the Bohemian imagination like fairy tales of good versus evil. The atmosphere in Prague reached its nadir in 1389. In Easter of that year, which coincided with Passover, Jews were accused of vandalizing the eucharistic wafer. Throughout Prague, priests sermonized that Jews had tortured the Host just as they once tortured and killed Jesus. In the resulting pogrom, three thousand Jewish men, women, and children were murdered in the streets, homes, and especially the synagogues of the ghetto. Rabbi Avigdor Kara, who witnessed his own father murdered in the pogrom, wrote an elegy that is read every year in the Altneuschul on Yom Kippur:

*... For the glory of God we all had to die,
For the mercy of God we only could cry.
On the eve of the feast began their foul deed,
When they grabbed every Jew they found in the street,*

*And forcibly tried to make him give up,
the creed of his fathers, his trust in our God . . .
May the offering please God: be it lamb or sheep
or the innocent children over whose suffering we
weep . . . O God, put an end to such murderous deed: it follows us everywhere, the thought makes
us bleed, it made us a target of cruel contempt in the Land of Bohemia and wherever we went. . . .
(Quoted in Hana Volavkova, A Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague)*

After the pogrom had ended, many Jews fled the decimated ghetto for Poland and Hungary.

LIFE AMONG THE HUSSITES

The position of Prague's Jews fluctuated throughout the fifteenth century, but there was some reprieve from Catholic persecution during the era of the Hussites. The Hussites were Bohemian religious revolutionaries who followed the teachings of Jan Hus, a popular

preacher who was burned at the stake in 1415 for his critique against the corrupt power of the Church. From 1419 to 1436, the Hussites waged war for sovereignty in the Kingdom of Bohemia. During their struggles, they lent support to the Jews against persecution by the Church. The Jews, for their part, helped the Hussites in their fortifications against Vysehrad in 1420.

The Hussites pioneered a uniquely Czech form of philo-Semitism, which was to find repeated expression in later centuries. This was the fascination, among a persecuted, dissident group, with the Jewish people and religion. Radical Hussites mined the Torah for inspiration and came to regard themselves as the People of the Book. Instead of claiming that they had supplanted the Jews (as the early Church had), the Hussites regarded the Jews as their natural allies. This was particularly resonant when they considered the suffering the Jews had undergone at the hands of the Church. In a bizarre prophecy of early twentieth-century Labor Zionism, the Hussites proclaimed that it was due to Christian anti-Semitism that the Jewish people had been wrenched from an agrarian lifestyle and forced into non-physical financial pursuits. In correcting this, the Hussites were perhaps the first religious group in Christian European history to argue against the ban on Jews in craftsmanship and farming. This undoubtedly had an effect on the economic and social life of the Jewish Town, but unfortunately the reign of the Hussites was short-lived.

Admittedly, life under the Hussites was not a Utopia. It was during their tenure, for instance, that pogroms erupted in Prague in 1421 and 1422, causing many Jews to flee to Poland. Nevertheless, the Hussites were far more progressive than other Christian

movements in their relations with the Jews. Unlike Martin Luther's similar program in the sixteenth century, the Hussite movement did not predicate its kindness to Jews on the condition that they would be baptized. The Hussites even derived some of their messianic furor from Rabbi Avigdor Kara himself, who sympathized with their struggle against Catholic domination. As mentioned, this was not the last time a Czech opposition movement would find strength in the Jewish religion. As recently as the 1970s and 1980s, several gentile dissidents in Prague began meeting in the Jewish Community. Apparently they, too, identified with Judaism's perennial struggle in the face of hostile authority. Some of these dissidents even converted to Judaism.

In the early fifteenth century the most famous Prague Rabbi was Yomtov Lippmann Muhlhausen, author of *Sefer Nitzachon* (The Book of Victory), which argued against the theological tenets of Christianity. Rabbi Muhlhausen is today considered to be one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages.

PERSECUTION AND EXPULSION

An unforeseen consequence of the Hussite wars was the weakening of royal power in favor of the nobility and estates in the countryside and towns. As a result, Jews in the fifteenth century could not be as certain of the king's power to protect them, and ended up paying tax money to as many as three different administrations. Soon enough, increased competition in the towns, combined with rousing anti-Semitic speeches, led to expulsions from all the royal cities of Moravia. Similar expulsions shook Bohemia at the turn of the sixteenth century. The situation was different in Prague, where the Old Town began to administer Jewish rights and taxes during the Hussite wars. As long as the tax revenues kept flowing, Jews were left in relative peace. It was at this time that a third synagogue was added to the Jewish Town. Built by the Horowitz family, it was a private prayer hall that later became one of the main synagogues of the ghetto, the Pinchas Synagogue. It was located on the grounds of one of the earliest Jewish settlements in the Jewish Town.

In 1501, King Vladislav Jagiello gave the Jews of Prague the usual offer they couldn't refuse: For an annual fee of thousands of silver coins, he promised to protect the Jews and to secure their right to live in Prague and elsewhere in Bohemia. The royal bribe was put to the test the following year, when Old Town burghers decided that tax revenues were not sufficient reason to keep the Jews in the city. They attempted to expel the Jews from Prague and even from the rest of Bohemia. In 1507 and 1509 they made similar attempts, but in 1510 the king lived up to his promise and issued the Edict of Olomouc, which reaffirmed the right of Jews to remain in Bohemia.

The situation changed after Bohemia became part of the Hapsburg Empire in

1526. Although the Jewish Town enjoyed the arrival of Renaissance culture and growth - between 1522 and 1541 the population of the Jewish Town doubled - King Ferdinand I succumbed to burgher pressure and expelled the Jews from Bohemia in 1541. After some postponements, almost all the Jews of Prague were forced to leave in 1543. Residency permits were issued only to the highest bidders and to a few Jewish administrators. In 1545 the Jews were permitted to return, but a decade later another expulsion order was issued, in 1557. After various extensions and postponements, the Prague Jewish printer Mardocai Zemah made a trip to Rome to entreat Pope Pius IV to call off the persecutions. The pope acquiesced and instructed King Ferdinand I that it was no longer necessary to expel the Jews. The expulsion order was cancelled in 1563.

THE RENAISSANCE AND THE GOLDEN AGE

In spite of these fluctuations of fortune, the Jewish Community of Prague plunged heartily into the Renaissance early in the sixteenth century. One of the finest examples of this was the celebrated Hebrew printing press established in 1512 in Prague. Emerging roughly forty years after the first such press was established in Rome in 1473, the Prague press is the oldest Hebrew press north of the Alps. One of the oldest existing products of this press is the *Seder Zemirot u'Birkat Ha'mazon*, an illustrated book of hymns, including the grace after meals, from 1514. The book was especially remarkable for its use of colored woodcuts. Other highlights of the press were the Pentateuch from 1518 and 1530, and the famous Prague Haggadah of 1526, which was the world's first Haggadah to be illustrated with woodcuts, including a rather surprising one of a naked female torso. These books were imitated throughout Europe for their innovative typographical and illustrative style. The leading Hebrew printer of the time was Gershon HaCohen and his sons, later known as the "Gersonide family," which dominated Hebrew printing in Prague until the end of the eighteenth century. In 1527 King Ferdinand I himself granted them an exclusive license to print Hebrew books in Prague. Perhaps in gratitude, the Gersonides designed a logo effusive with a love for Prague: it features Prague's coat of arms, consisting of the three towers of Prague, as well as the twin-tailed Bohemian lion.

It was in this period that the Prague ghetto was enlivened by the feisty Horowitz family, an irreverent clan of power brokers and mystics led by the inimitable Aaron Meshulam Horowitz. Aaron Meshulam Horowitz, a recalcitrant merchant with privileges granted by two kings, was the most powerful Jew in Prague in the first half of the sixteenth century. It was partly due to his efforts that the Jewish Community survived even during the repeated expulsion orders of the time. As a mark of his prosperity, Aaron Meshulam built the Pinchas Synagogue in 1535 for his family and

friends.

But true prosperity could begin only after the death of the problematic King Ferdinand I in 1564. His successor, King Maximilian II, ushered in a heyday of cultural growth for the Jews. It is said that King Maximilian His Protestant sympathies gave him the courage to resist traditional Church anti-Semitism. First he cancelled the expulsion order that had been a scourge on the Jews of Bohemia throughout Ferdinand's reign. In 1567, Maximilian II reconfirmed the right to life and religion for the Jews of Prague. He lifted the ban against Jews in trade, and in 1571 paid the Jewish Town a royal visit. It was King Maximilian II who provided the infrastructure of tolerance that blossomed into an unprecedented period of prosperity during the regime of his successor, Emperor Rudolf II. Reigning from 1576 to 1612, Rudolf II has been immortalized in Jewish history as ruler during the Golden Age of Prague Jewry.

Emperor Rudolf II certainly tolerated the Jews. Mad as a bat, Rudolf II tolerated just about anything, from alchemists to astrologers to pseudo-surrealist painters. In 1584, Emperor Rudolf II moved his imperial seat and residence to Prague, festooning the city with his trademark lunacy and giving the new capital an economic and population boom. The emperor spearheaded an irreverent foray into the arts and sciences, providing the substance for much of the "Magic Prague" mystique of future generations. It was in this electrified atmosphere that the Jews were permitted economic, religious, and cultural freedom. In the legal realm, Rudolf II extended Jewish privileges as soon as he was coronated. He promised Jews permanent safety in Prague and Bohemia, protecting them under his royal umbrella. He issued decrees protecting the Jews from the hostility of the Old Town burghers and guilds, permitted them to become craftsmen, and ensured that all disputes between Jews and Christians be judged by the royal court. In 1599 Rudolf II even exempted the Jews from all city taxes. It was due to these economic policies that the Jews of Prague were finally able to branch beyond moneylending and become shopkeepers and artisans. What resulted was the Golden Age of Prague Jewish history, typically referred to as the period from 1570 to 1620. In numbers alone, the Community grew from practical obliteration in 1564 to over three thousand by the end of the century. Prague became a true Jewish melting pot, as enterprising Jews from all around the world came and settled in the Jewish Town. In this favorable climate, the Jews had the freedom to produce some of the most eminent personalities of the Diaspora. A brief glance at the Who's Who list reveals a cultural diversity rarely matched in Jewish history. There was, first and foremost, Rabbi Judah Loew, the charismatic iconoclast who is recognized as one of the greatest rabbis of all time for both his philosophy - an articulate blend of mystical and rationalist thought - and his Community ardor. It was Rabbi Loew, for instance, who established the guidelines for the first modern Jewish Burial Society in Prague and who revolutionized Jewish education by focusing on the

ethical basis of Jewish law. There was the historian, mathematician, and astronomer David Gans, who discoursed with the likes of royal court astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the well-being of the Jewish Town, there was Mordechai Maisel, the first modern "court Jew" and a philanthropist of awe-inspiring magnitude. Mordechai Maisel built up the topography of the ghetto and made it a place where the average Jew could live in decency and respect. The mayor of the Jewish Town, Maisel built the High Synagogue, the Maisel Synagogue, the original Klausen buildings, a *mikveh*, an almshouse, a hospital, a cemetery extension, and the Jewish Town Hall. It was Maisel who covered the sand-swept and muddy paths of the ghetto with cobblestones. The face of the Jewish Town was fundamentally altered, reflecting the unprecedented prosperity of the day. As Hana Volavkova, former director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, put it, "Toward the end of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the seventeenth century there cannot have been a more familiar sound in Prague Jewish Town than the noise of the builder's hammer, the stonemason's chisel, and the slap of the mason's trowel as he laid stone upon stone . . ." (Hana Volavkova, *The Pinkas Synagogue: A Memorial of the Past and of Our Days*).

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Not long after Maisel died, his role as benefactor was filled by Jacob Bashevi, who gave the Jewish Town yet another urgently needed facelift. Bashevi was the first Jew in the Hapsburg monarchy to be knighted; his new name was Jacob Bashevi von Treuenberg. A "court Jew" like his predecessor, Bashevi built the High Court Synagogue (since destroyed) and orchestrated an unprecedented expansion of the Jewish Town by thirty-nine houses, it was largely due to Bashevi's influence that the Jewish Town was spared exile and pogrom during the Bohemian battles of the first half of the seventeenth century.

The year 1620 is ingrained on Czech consciousness as the defining moment of its modern history. In November of that year, the Czech anti-Catholic forces were defeated at the Battle of White Mountain, devastating Czech national sovereignty for two hundred years. According to a Czech tradition that has never been proven, the victorious Catholic Hapsburg gave the Protestants a choice: convert to Catholicism, convert to Judaism, or leave the country altogether. Perhaps at no other time in Europe's pogrom-laden history were people forced to become Jewish. If the tradition is true, there are no conversion statistics: it was such an embarrassment that no records were saved by either side. The numbers of converts, it should be noted, were relatively small. Nonetheless, many Czechs today trace their ancestry to that enforced conversion. One of them is the renowned writer Ivan Klima, who insists that

although both his parents are Jewish, his mother's ancestors were among those to convert after White Mountain. It should be mentioned, however, that the White Mountain stories are told mostly by Czech Jews eager to shed all vestiges of their Jewishness. Thus it was that early in the twentieth century, many Jews insisted that their Slavic surnames indicated a Czech pedigree distorted after the Battle of White Mountain.

The devastation of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) brought mixed fortune for the Jews of Prague. On the one hand, Emperor Ferdinand II, desperate for economic support in the war, took great pains to ensure the safety of the Jews. While his troops were ransacking Prague after the Battle of White Mountain, for instance, the emperor prohibited them from harming the Jewish Town. In 1623, the emperor confirmed the freedom of life, trade, and religion for the Jews of Prague and Bohemia. On the other hand, the fluctuations of the war forced the Jews into the unenviable position of having to balance their loyalties between two factions, either of which could devastate the Jewish Town if it suspected treachery. In addition, wartime taxes drained the Community of resources. It was these very tax burdens that in 1627 led the Jews of Prague to turn on their great Rabbi Yomtov Lippman Heller, who was forced out of Prague and eventually settled in Cracow [see page 334]. Despite these hardships, the Jewish Community of Prague continued to grow. In 1638, the first official census of Prague's Jews revealed that there were 7,815 Jews residing in the Jewish Town.

JEWISH POPULATION GROWTH AND THE FAMILIANTS LAWS

At the beginning and end of the 1680s two natural disasters almost wiped out the Jewish Town of Prague. The first struck in the form of the plague of 1680, which claimed three thousand Jews and led to the opening of a plague cemetery outside the Old Town. Then in 1689 a boundless fire ravaged the ghetto, killing several people and destroying 318 homes and eleven synagogues. Almost nothing in the Jewish Town was untouched by the fire, and the 1690s were spent in massive restorations of homes and synagogues.

Meanwhile, the Jews had to deal with constant Jesuit attacks against their religion and life. The Jesuits, housed in Prague's famous Klementinum, conducted regular show trials and open scenes of torture designed to frighten and amaze the illiterate masses of Bohemia into becoming devout Catholics. All prior sadism and ruthlessness of the Church was invested by the Jesuits with an imaginative, homey spin that included ripping people's tongues out, dismembering people alive in public, gouging out people's hearts and eyes, and burning people at the stake. Naturally, the Jews received the brunt of these "Bible sessions." The most notorious was the case of Lazar Abeles, who was tortured into suicide after being accused of killing his baptized

son. Another case led to the imposition of the famous Hebrew prayer that adorns the statue of Jesus on Charles Bridge. In addition, Jewish books were regularly censored, and Jews were forced to attend proselytizing sermons.

Ideas for Jewish population control had been brewing in the Prague City Council as well as the entire empire for some time. The fire of 1689 gave these campaigns the force of urgency. Thus the Jews of Prague were attacked on both sides: They were not given enough land in which to live, and when the overcrowding resulted in fires, they were blamed for forcing too many people into the town. The City Council considered moving the ghetto outside the Old Town to the village of Liben or even to Stvanice Island in the Vltava! Thankfully, these proposals were abandoned and the Jews, through the help of Jewish communities throughout Europe, were able to remain and rebuild the Jewish Town in Prague. The Jewish population in Prague continued to grow. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, there were approximately eleven thousand Jews in the ghetto. They comprised half the population of the Old Town, and twenty-eight percent of the total population of Prague. At this time, the Prague Jewish Community was the largest Jewish Community in the world, a rank it would never match again. Due to privileges granted throughout the seventeenth century, their economic life was not limited to moneylending: in the census of 1729, almost one-third of the twenty-three hundred "gainfully employed" Jews worked as artisans, including tailors, shoemakers, goldsmiths, and even musicians. In the second half of the seventeenth century, these artisans began to organize themselves into eclectic Jewish guilds, which imitated the Christian guilds of Prague from which Jews were prohibited. The growth of Jewish Prague mirrored the Jewish population growth throughout Bohemia and Moravia, due in part to the influx of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe fleeing the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648.

In response to what he considered an intolerable growth of the Jewish population, Emperor Charles VI issued the *Familiant's Laws* in 1726 and 1727. These were to have a devastating effect on Bohemian Jewry for the next 120 years. The *Familiant's Laws* decreed that only 8,541 Jewish families would be tolerated in Bohemia, and 5,106 in Moravia. Only the eldest son in a Jewish family would be given the right to marry. All other sons were forced to emigrate, to marry illegally in the countryside or under the protection of nobility, or to die single. Such emasculating legislation remained in effect all the way up to the Revolution of 1848. It was the repeal of the *Familiant's Laws*, in fact, that allowed Franz Kafka's grandfather Jakob to marry finally at the age of 34; before that, he had been prohibited from marrying because he had a stepbrother who was one year older.

EXPULSION: 1745-1748

The tenuous position of the Jews under Emperor Charles VI was made even worse when his daughter, Maria Theresa, became empress in 1740. An ardent Catholic who imbibed more than her share of Church anti-Semitism, Empress Maria Theresa accused the Jews of siding with the Prussians during her battles for the "Hapsburg Heritage." At her wit's end, the empress decreed the expulsion of the Jews from Bohemia in 1744 and from Moravia in 1745. Although the Prague City Council opposed the action, the Jews were forced out of Prague during a severe winter in January 1745. For a few years, they were to be permitted to remain in Bohemian villages at a distance of at least two days' journey from Prague. Afterwards, all of Bohemia and Moravia were to be off-limits for Jews.

But Empress Maria Theresa had not counted on the devastating effect *ajudenrein* Prague would have on the economy. Jews had been moneylenders, suppliers of raw materials, and reliable customers in Prague markets. Without the Jews, inflation shot up. At a hearing in 1747, most of the guilds in Prague lamented the loss of Jews in the economy. Meanwhile, officials from England, the Netherlands, and elsewhere expressed grave concern over the empress's treatment of Jews. Finally, in 1748, the empress rescinded her decree, and Jews were permitted to return to Prague. To avoid humiliation she imposed a severe annual "toleration tax" of 204,000 guildens that the Jews were required to pay to be tolerated and to prevent future expulsions. As usual in European society, the Jews were compelled to do whatever was necessary to remain in Empress Maria Theresa's favor. The Jewish Museum in Prague owns a fascinating book of benedictions written by Rabbi Ezekiel Landau (1713 - 1793), the famous anti-acculturation rabbi, filled with prayers for the recovery of the empress from illness.

By the autumn of 1749, 6,061 Jews had returned to the Jewish Town of Prague. During the banishment, the ghetto had become a slum for Prague's poor, and the area was badly in need of repair. But just as the Jews set out to rebuild their town, a devastating fire raged through the ghetto in 1754. After the blaze of 1689, this was the second worst fire in the cramped ghetto's history, destroying 190 houses and six synagogues. In all, two-thirds of the homes in the ghetto were destroyed. The reconstruction that followed, combined with the empress's continually increasing "toleration tax," sapped the Jewish Community of its previous economic strength.

By the time rebuilding was finished in 1765, the Jewish Town had acquired the early Classicist look it retained, in spite of later renovations, until the ghetto was destroyed at the turn of the twentieth century.

THE EDICT OF TOLERANCE

At the end of her life, Empress Maria Theresa was drawn into a debate with her son, Josef II, about what to do with the Jews. The empress was convinced that the Jewish question in the Hapsburg Monarchy could be solved only through forced conversion or expulsion. Josef II, by contrast, was determined to jump-start the monarchy from a feudal, agrarian system into a modern capitalist economy driven by autonomous individuals and guided by a centralized state. He felt that the age-old Christian disenfranchisement of the Jews was an anachronism that had to be discarded if the monarchy was to enter the modern era. Besides, Enlightenment thinking argued against religious fundamentalism in the economic and political spheres of society. Indeed, it was Josef II's plan to unyoke not only the Jews, but all non-Catholic denominations as part of his overall program to centralize authority in his empire. These debates took place against the backdrop of the first partition of Poland in 1772, which delivered the phenomenal figure of 250,000 Galician Jews into the domain of the Hapsburg monarchy.

As soon as his mother died in 1780, Emperor Josef II had free reign to implement his views. Almost at once, the debate on the "Jewish Question" hit the streets of Vienna and Prague. Anonymous pamphlets appeared extolling the industriousness of the Jews and testifying that this would only improve if they were given more rights. Opposition pamphlets painted the Jews as venal parasites who would destroy the monarchy from within. One memorandum repeated the blood libel accusation that Jews murdered Christians for ritualistic purposes. It went on to argue that Jews already owned one-third of the wealth of Bohemia, and even without equal rights they would control all the money in the monarchy within fifty years. Jews were depicted as devils, goats, and leeches. As was often the case, the anti-Semitic arguments drew a specter of Jewish vampirism when the real fear was of equal economic competition. Josef II listened to these arguments and ultimately modified his more ambitious plans. Even after he presented his compromise plan, the Bohemian government argued that instead of giving the Jews rights, the state should deport all but the richest Jews to the farthest reaches of the empire.

Nonetheless, in October 1781 Josef II issued the Edict of Tolerance for the Jews of Bohemia. Early in 1782, Moravian Jewry received a similar Edict. Although it was not a declaration of equal rights, the Edict of Tolerance did much to overhaul the structure of Jewish communal life and to give Jews their first opportunity to enter the larger world. In order to integrate the Jews into the economy of the state, the Edict forbade the use of Hebrew in all business documents and secular transactions. Jews were encouraged to abandon the *cheder*, or Jewish religious school, and to establish state-supervised elementary schools with secular curricula. By 1786, only graduates of

these secular elementary schools would be permitted to marry. In small Jewish communities, the children would be permitted to attend Christian schools. The universities were opened up to Jews. In order to move Jews beyond moneylending, an occupation that had for centuries been encouraged openly by the king and tacitly by the clergy, all sorts of trades were made available to the Jews. That Jews had already been practicing trades for centuries might have escaped Josef's attention; perhaps the ruling was meant to encourage the habit in the countryside. Jews were also encouraged to start factories and to engage in agriculture, although they were still forbidden from owning land. In addition, anti-Semitic legislation requiring Jews to wear special identifying marks were declared null and void.

There are several points to stress about the Edict of Tolerance. This was not a Civil Rights Act by any means; nor was it a Patent of Citizenship, Decree of Equality, or Declaration of Love. Josef II boasted that his Edict granted the Jews "near-equality," but this was an exaggeration at best. The Edict upheld restrictions on Jewish settlement and on "tolerated Jews," continued to deny citizenship to the Jews, and forbade them from becoming master craftsmen. The Familiants Law was upheld. Jews continued to be confined to the ghetto until 1849, and complete emancipation would come only in 1867. The emperor was more candid when he conceded the purpose of the Edict was "to make [the Jews] useful to the state." Subsequent decrees furthered the cause. In 1783 and 1784, the authority of the *beit din*, or Jewish court of law, was abolished except in religious and marital matters; all other disputes were to be tried in secular courts. In 1787, Jews were required to adopt German surnames. With a changed language, education, commerce, communal authority, and even names, the Jews would indeed be more useful to the economy of the monarchy as it shifted its engines for the landscape of a modern state.

Ever since the earliest throes of emancipation, it has been hotly debated whether the reforms were healthy for the Jewish Community or the beginning of its destruction. On the one hand, the status quo of segregation and persecution had to be altered. On the other hand, once it was altered, Jewish autonomous integrity faced a schism from which it would never quite recover. Ironically, Jews had survived as a closely-knit entity through seventeen centuries of Diaspora largely due to state-sanctioned persecution. Once the legal barriers began to disappear, Jews found that the most successful way to enter the larger European society was to abandon any reminder of their Jewish heritage. This they did with a zest unparalleled in Jewish history, ushering in an age of almost mind-boggling assimilation in the nineteenth century. Needless to say, the same crisis and debate continues to rage, albeit in a much different environment, in the United States today.

Even in eighteenth-century Prague, the praises of emancipation were not sung in all circles. The greatest rabbi in Bohemia in the eighteenth century, Rabbi Ezekiel Landau (1713-1793), feared that the new measures would intrude overwhelmingly on

Jewish observant life. Elected chief rabbi one year after the catastrophic fire of 1754, Rabbi Landau - known as the *Nodeh Bi'Yehudah* after his most famous work - succeeded in rebuilding the Prague Jewish Community into the most vibrant Jewish Community in Central Europe. Rabbi Landau feared that the Edict of Tolerance, along with the internal changes of the "Jewish Enlightenment," would lead the Jews on a path away from Torah law. Nonetheless, even such a staunch critic as Rabbi Landau had to compromise in the face of the monarchy's steadfast determination to "educate" the Jews. After being given a role in planning the schools, and after being assured that the most radical plans would not be implemented, Rabbi Landau gave the schools his tacit approval.

In Prague alone, approximately 17,800 students - or forty percent of Jewish school-age children - passed through the newly ordained Jewish school between 1790 and 1831.

ENLIGHTENMENT, EQUALITY, ASSIMILATION

Two major trends marked the Prague Jewish Community in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the Jews made enormous strides in the economic and cultural life of Czech society as discrimination laws were abolished. On the other hand, it was these years that saw the near-total erosion of Jewish religious life in Bohemia. As a result of nineteenth century emancipation, the autonomous Jewish Community structure, which had defined Jewish life for over half a millennium, was dismantled everywhere as Jews were integrated into the secular state. Soon enough, Jewish communities all over Europe were powerless to stop the high rate of withdrawal from Jewish tradition.

But in Prague, the movement away from Judaism came particularly early, and was all the more severe. This fact is often overlooked by visitors, who assume that the plethora of synagogues in the Old Town alone indicates a vibrant Jewish religious Community that was destroyed only in the Holocaust. In reality, Jewish tradition in Bohemia had become so desolate that in 1924, Rabbi Gustav Sicher rang a desperate note in the *Zidovský kalendář* (Jewish Almanac): "In Bohemia, there is an immense decline of Judaism, of Jewish life, of Jewishness, in scholarship, religion, and ritual. . . Does anyone need to be told that ritual Judaism is almost dead? . . . Today if they are not empty or used for entertainment, our synagogues have become rooms for a mute Community, ignoring the appeals of the cantors. How wretched the figures that have to be looked for and paid to make up a *minyan* ..." (excerpted in Wilma Abeles Iggers, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: A Historical Reader*). Even the population eventually stagnated. There were 27,000 Jews in Prague in 1890. This number increased to only 31,751 in 1921.

What were the reasons for the unparalleled exodus away from Jewish tradition? First, of course, was the Edict of Tolerance and the comprehensive education transformation among the Jews. Young Jews raised in the German language and secular subjects had little incentive to pursue a traditional Jewish education, which offered little practical preparation for the modern world. The second factor to influence assimilation came in the form of laws passed in the middle of the nineteenth century. These led to the full emancipation of the Jews: In 1841, Jews were permitted to own property; in 1849, they were released from the ghetto; finally, in 1867, Jews were given full emancipation with the creation of the Dual Austria-Hungarian Monarchy. In appreciation for these rights and in eagerness to assimilate, Prague Jews embraced German language and culture wholeheartedly as they entered the urban bourgeois class. They dropped Yiddish from the vernacular, considering it a vestige of the ghettos from which they had struggled so ardently to escape.

Other reasons for the decline of Jewish tradition were more complex. In the nineteenth century, Prague lacked an Orthodox rabbinical heavyweight comparable Bratislava's Rabbi Moses Sofer, known as the "Chatam Sofer" (1762 - 1839), who headed a yeshiva that was a beacon of Jewish tradition throughout Central Eastern Europe. Although Prague's venerable Rabbi Solomon Judah Rapoport (1790 - 1867) was a crucial figure in Enlightenment circles, he did not work to provide a bulwark against rampant assimilation. After Rabbi Rapoport, there have been no rabbis of great magnitude in Prague to this day. There was no rabbinical seminary in the Czech lands. In the nineteenth century, in fact, many of Prague's rabbis came from abroad. As for the tradition itself, Jews who became disenchanted with Orthodoxy found little desire for Reform Judaism. Instead, Prague's Jews generally avoided all expression of Jewish practice by the end of the nineteenth century. It is possible that the secular bent of Czech Jews was partly the influence of larger Czech society, whose anti-clerical tradition had made Czechs skeptical of the Church for centuries.

Another factor in the massive assimilation was demographics. When the Jews were permitted freedom of movement in 1848, they began moving in large numbers from the countryside to towns and cities. This in turn led to a weakening of the strong Jewish family traditions that had once been the norm in the countryside. Jews who came to urban centers such as Prague were often too preoccupied with survival in the city to be able to continue the ancient practices of their parents. Such was the case for Hermann Kafka, who owned a dry goods store. His son, Franz Kafka (1883 - 1924), perhaps the most searingly perceptive writer of the twentieth century, summed up the demographic shift in an anguished letter addressed to his father in 1919:

You really had brought some traces of Judaism with you from the ghetto-like village Community; it was not much and it dwindled a little more in the city and during your military service; but still, the impressions and memories of your youth did just about suffice for some sort of Jewish life . . .

Basically the faith that ruled your life consisted in your believing in the unconditional Tightness of the opinions of a certain class of Jewish society . . . Even in this there was still Judaism enough, but it was too little to be handed on to the child; it all dribbled away while you were passing it on. . . . The whole thing is, of course, no isolated phenomenon. It was much the same with a large section of this transitional generation of Jews, which had migrated from the still comparatively devout countryside to the cities.

Franz Kafka, "Letter to His Father," in *The Sons*

To this day, the transformation of Jewish life in the nineteenth century continues to be felt among Prague's Jews, who are as resistant to Jewish tradition as their great-grandparents once were.

But Jewish fondness for the culture and language of the Hapsburgs was not without its price. It is an irony of history that just as the Jews began to orient themselves toward German culture, the Czech national movement was born. Czech nationalists saw the Hapsburg Monarchy as their oppressors. It seemed the next logical step to view the Jews, as cogs in the Hapsburg wheel of domination, as their adversaries. Beginning in the 1870s, many Czechs protested against the preponderance of German-language schools in Bohemia, and blamed the Jews for being the schools' most avid supporters.

At first, Jews responded to Czech nationalist anti-Semitism by embracing German culture more fully. But toward the close of the nineteenth century, the German minority in Prague became more stridently nationalistic and anti-Semitic. Jews responded by trying to adopt Czech culture instead. The Czech-Jewish movement was born, with its aim the full integration of the Jewish people into an independent Czech state. In 1890, seventy-four percent of Jews in Prague claimed German as their first language. By 1900, the proportion had shrunk to forty-five percent. The Czech-Jewish journal *Kozvoj* appeared in 1904 with its aim the further assimilation of Jews into Czech society. Jewish students increasingly attended Czech-language schools. But despite their drive for acceptance among the Czechs, Jews continued to be considered either an instrument of the Hapsburgs or as an entirely foreign entity. One example of this was the rioting of November 1920, during which Czechs broke into the Jewish Town Hall, destroyed archives, and burned Hebrew manuscripts. To quell the rioting, the American embassy flew the American flag over the Jewish Town Hall, protecting the people within.

Thus it was that no group would accept the Jews as a member: the Germans felt the Jew was racially unacceptable, and the Czechs felt the Jew was too German. It was a classic vise in which the Jews had been caught time and again in the Diaspora. Young Jews often castigated their parents for the expetent alliances the latter formed, volleying between the Germans and the Czechs. Kafka wrote to his father, "You were capable, for instance, of running down the Czechs, and then the Germans,

and then the Jews, and what is more, not only selectively but in every respect, and finally nobody was left except yourself" (Franz Kafka, "Letter to His Father," in *The Sons*).

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, many younger Jews sought a new path away from the competing nationalisms of Germans and Czechs. There was also the age-old issue of fathers and sons. The Jewish men and women who had poured into Prague in the middle of the nineteenth century had to grapple each day to survive the competitive urban metropolis. Not so their children, who came of age after their parents had achieved some measure of stability. After studying a wide range of subjects in German schools, the children formed the first generation of Prague Jewish intellectuals in the modern period. These Jews, already excluded from both Czech and German society, faced an additional burden: they were repelled by the commercial lifestyles of their parents. In addition, some of these Jews reproached their parents for having brought so little Jewish spirituality and tradition with them from the countryside. A very similar conflict would later arise in the United States between uneducated Jewish immigrants and their intellectually ambitious children. In Prague in the late nineteenth century, young Jews often felt a longing to return to their roots, but they disagreed with the tenets of Orthodox Judaism. As the Prague writer Otokar Fischer put it as late as the 1920s, "A wayfaring half-breed whose psyche is transitional, I am too alienated for values that are traditional. / I am different from those whose song I air, / A renegade to those whose blood I share" (excerpted in Wilma Abeles Iggers, *The Jew of Bohemia and Moravia: A Historical Reader*). Young Jews were truly afloat, both nationally, spiritually, and professionally.

It was the convergence of all these pressures and confrontations that compelled Jews to redefine their very identity at the end of the nineteenth century. The result often produced the great Jewish geniuses of the modern age. In addition to Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud and Gustav Mahler were born in Bohemia and Moravia to typical Jewish parents of the time. Of course, every Jew in fin de siecle Prague was not, as some scholars have suggested, writing the Great Jewish Novel or redefining the destiny of the Jewish people. Most Jews chose lifestyles as conservative, pragmatic, and assimilated as those of their parents. But the minority of Jews that sought an alternative to the status quo was so prolific in its activities that one can almost point to a Renaissance of Jewish culture in the early twentieth century.

One way of filling the national and spiritual void was to plunge headlong into Prague's cultural scene. To name but a few writers, Max Brod (1884 - 1968), Franz Werfel (1890 - 1945), Karel Polacek (1892-1944), Frantisek Langer (1888 -1965), Oskar Baum (1883 - 1941), and Egon Erwin Kisch (1885 - 1948) virtually defined the atmosphere of fin de siecle Prague. Other Jews sought strength in a campaign for national Jewish rebirth. In 1899, the Zionist *Bar Kochba* society provided an intellectual student forum in Prague for the issue of Jewish rejuvenation in Palestine.

The *Bar Kochba* society was concerned not only with Zionism but with all aspects of modern Jewish identity. Still others (admittedly a small minority) walked the streets of Prague's dissolving Jewish Town and found inspiration in the Jewish past.

None of these paths constituted a return to traditional Jewish life but rather an attempt to find a replacement for the quintessential Jewish sense of spiritual and communal vertigo in modern Europe. In fact, only one Jew in Prague became famous for a total return to Jewish tradition and life. This was Jiri Langer (1894 - 1943), the iconoclastic younger brother of the famed Czech playwright Frantisek Langer. Tellingly, Jiri Langer did not find his Jewish roots in Prague itself. Instead, he left Prague entirely and headed East to Galicia, where Jewish life was still untrammelled by massive assimilation. There he met and studied in the Belz hasidic court. After he returned to Prague, Langer became, to the shock and horror of his family, the only homegrown *hasid* in Prague in the twentieth century. Franz Kafka, who learned a little Hebrew from Langer, also found his greatest Jewish fulfillment not in Prague but among Jews from Eastern Europe: among his friends in a travelling Yiddish theater from Lvov, at the court of a visiting hasidic Rebbe, and among Galician refugees in the First World War.

The Czechoslovak state created in 1918 revealed much of the demographics of European Jewry in microcosm: From the widespread assimilation of Bohemian Jews in the far west to the strict adherence to centuries-old tradition of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenian Jews in the far east, the integrated Jewish communities of the new state had little in common. But the structure of the state looked good for the Jews: it was a democracy and Jews were given minority rights. The president, Tomas G. Masaryk, was one of Europe's most amicable leaders toward the Jews. The stable democracy of Czechoslovakia promised great opportunities for the Jews of Prague. In 1930, there were 35,463 Jews living in Prague. This number would increase to nearly 55,000 in 1940, partly due to the influx of refugees from the Sudetenland, Austria, and elsewhere.

THE HOLOCAUST

With the Munich Agreement of September 30, 1938, Great Britain effectively handed Czechoslovakia to the Germans under the pretext of "appeasement." On March 15, 1939, the Germans occupied Prague and created the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Throughout the Czech lands, synagogues were burned and pogroms unleashed against the Jews. Fascists tried to blow up the Altneuschul twice in 1939, but both attempts failed. In June, Jews were expelled from all facets of the economy. Jews who ceded their property and belongings to German banks were permitted to leave the country. Adolf Eichmann originally tried to concentrate all the

Jews in Bohemia and Moravia into a Prague ghetto, but this plan was abandoned.

When war officially began in September 1939, the situation became much worse. Anti-Semitic legislation was repeatedly passed, denying the Jews everything from free movement to war rations. Schools, trams, parks, and restaurants were only some of the places from which Jews were forbidden. Beginning in September 1941, all Jews wore yellow Stars of David labelled "Jude." At this time, there were 46,801 Jews registered in Prague. One month later, five thousand Jews were transported to the Lodz ghetto. Only 260 people survived.

Reinhard Heydrich became Acting Reich Protector on September 27, 1941. He soon convened a meeting of top Nazi officials in Prague Castle to decide on methods of achieving the "final solution" to the Jewish question. Terezin was chosen as a temporary camp where the Jews would be incarcerated; those who did not die there would be shipped to Auschwitz. The Jewish Community was informed of the deportations to Terezin, but was told that it would simply be a "labor ghetto."

At each deportation, the deportees were marched at night to wooden shacks on the Veletrzní grounds in Holesovice. There they slept on the floor of the shacks while administrative details - signing over all personal belongings - were worked out. Usually within three days, they were shipped to Terezin.

Terezin, which had room for approximately seventeen thousand people, was overcrowded with as many as sixty thousand Jews at any moment after the full-scale deportations began. People died of hunger, disease, and especially deportations to death camps in the east. Of the 45,500 Prague Jews deported to Terezin, only seventy-five hundred survived the war.

Czechs generally pride themselves on being innocent bystanders who did not harm the Jews during the Holocaust. This was decidedly not the case. Although the Czechs were far less vociferous in disposing of their Jewish population than were their Slovak neighbors, they also offered virtually no help to the Jews being taken away. There was complete silence and indifference to the Jewish transports throughout Bohemia and Moravia. Instances of Jews being assisted by Czechs were almost nonexistent. Instead, Czechs in general waited silently for their Jewish neighbors to be deported, after which they raided the vacated apartments for furniture and valuables. This behavior was not unique; it is borne out in countless survivors' testimonies, and in several stories and novels written about the Holocaust. In *Life with a Star*, Jiri Weil's nightmarish account of Jewish life in Nazi-occupied Prague, the author paints an expressionistic picture of Czechs visiting their Jewish neighbors before the latter are deported. Perhaps more than anywhere else, the scene summarizes Czech moral lethargy during the Holocaust:

They didn't say a word. They didn't look at us; they pretended not to see us at all. I remained sitting at the table, and in my embarrassment I began to stir the tea I had drunk long before. They

only looked at the objects in the room. They caressed the furniture, took the pewter mugs in their hands, felt the upholstery on the sofas. They calculated loudly between them the quality and sturdiness of various objects; they discussed how they would move the furniture around. We were already dead. They had come to claim their inheritance. . . . Only when they left did they look at us, but I noticed that they were actually looking at the teacups, spoons, and sugar bowl.

Jiri Weil, *Life with a Star*

POSTWAR TO TODAY

After the war, about twenty thousand Jews came to Bohemia and Moravia, one-third of whom originated in the easternmost fringe of Czechoslovakia, or Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia. Prague was a center of Jewish life until a large wave of emigration to Israel began in 1948.

It is important to remember that almost all the Jews who renewed religious communal life after the war were transplants from the East. They came from villages in Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, a part of Czechoslovakia (today the Ukraine) that had experienced centuries of traditional Jewish life almost completely shielded from Western European currents of Enlightenment and assimilation. Without them, Jewish communal life in Prague might have been erased completely in the Holocaust. Even today, the situation is much the same. If you come to pray in the Altneuschul, you will find that practically all the elderly worshippers who are not tourists are from Eastern Slovakia or Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia.

In 1948, Czechoslovakia was the only country to offer a steady supply of arms and military training to the newborn state of Israel. In the same year, the Communists gained power, and in the next two years twenty-six thousand Jews left Czechoslovakia, most of them heading to Israel. The country's Jewish population was thus reduced by more than half.

In 1950, the Jewish Community in Prague and in all of Czechoslovakia entered yet another era of trial and torture. Rudolf Slansky, a Jew who was the general secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, was accused of plotting against the government. Suddenly, reports circulated about a "cosmopolitan Zionist conspiracy" to subvert the Czechoslovak state. A total of fourteen leading Communist officials, including eleven Jews, were tried in the so-called "Slansky Trial," the first government-orchestrated show trials in the communist world. The Jewish roots of most of the accused were not merely hinted at: they were made the focus of attention in the most iniquitous anti-Semitic propaganda campaign since that waged by Germany in the previous decade. The trial turned into a farcical crusade against the Jewish state and all of its "covert emissaries" - i.e., Jews - living in Czechoslovakia. Eleven of the accused were executed; three were given life imprisonment. The

communist newspaper *Rude Pravo* wrote, "May the dogs die a dog's death - the Jews a Jew's death" (excerpted in Wilma Abeles Iggers, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: A Historical Reader*).

The Slansky trial did not end with the sentences passed. Jews throughout Czechoslovak society were forced out of their jobs and even the most assimilated Jews, eager to erase all remnants of their Jewish pasts, were branded as Zionist conspirators. The campaign was orchestrated by the state but permeated all aspects of Czechoslovak society, from employment to education to social discourse. In the 1990s it was revealed that the Czechoslovak secret police had been compiling lists of "Zionists" (Jews) in the event of the need for scapegoats in the future.

The political and social thaw in the 1960s, culminating in Dubcek's "Prague Spring," unleashed a surprising amount of interest in things Jewish. Books were published on Jewish themes including the Holocaust, and many Czechs who weren't Jewish began to feel solidarity with the Jewish people. But with increasing Soviet hostility to Israel after the Six Day War of 1967, followed by the crushing of Prague Spring by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, the situation for Prague's Jews became more difficult. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, there were not-so-secret police officers stationed at Prague's Altneuschul, noting the identities of those who attended services. Even the rabbi was forced into collaborating with the authorities; if he hadn't, there probably would have been no Jewish worship at all during those years. Nonetheless, it is a mistake to describe the 1970s and 1980s as a desert of Jewish life. Communal institutions carried on, but in a more cautious manner.

In Prague, as in each of the other cities discussed in this book, the generation of Jews born soon after the Holocaust has come to be known as the "missing generation." Survivors of the Holocaust who remained in Central Eastern Europe discouraged their children, either subtly or quite openly, from expressing any form of Jewish identity. This changed during the thaw of the 1960s, when many Jews began to meet socially in the Jewish Town Hall, but in the repression of the 1970s, old habits of nonexpression returned.

It was during this time that Jewish life exerted an exotic pull on many Czech dissidents and others who resented the totalitarianism of the regime. Judaism was seen as the ultimate dissident religion, and during the 1980s several dissidents met under the auspices of the Jewish Community or in private homes. Some even converted to Judaism.

After the change of government in 1989, Judaism became fashionable among the gentile populace. A gentile pop group drew inspiration from Jewish themes and became famous; gentile teenage girls were known to sport Stars of David on their necks and ears; gentile Czechs claimed, in ridiculous numbers, to have Jewish ancestry. It was as if the populace was so eager to forget the past - or, in the case of the older generations, their complicity in that past - that they identified with a religion

and culture that was free of the sins of the past half-century.

In the 1990s, when a new generation of Czech Jews took a more active interest in its roots, it was often done in a vacuum. So few parents had maintained contact with Jewish tradition and Community that young Jews had to build an identity practically out of scratch. On a very minor scale, this mirrored the search for roots seen among many Jews in Prague in the early twentieth century. In both eras, young Jews were rebelling against the assimilation of their parents. In both eras, young Jews often came to identify not with local Czech tradition, which had atrophied, but with Jewish life as practiced in areas to the East. In the 1990s, for example, many young Jews saw "true" Judaism not among Prague's native Jews but among postwar Jewish immigrants from Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia who continued to live in Prague. The legacy of the fierce assimilation of nineteenth century Prague has made it even more difficult today for young Jews to locate themselves in a continuum of Jewish life. A Czech Jewish friend once complained to me, "What can Czech Jews do? We can return to the tradition of no tradition!"

As for the general situation in the Prague Jewish Community following the fall of communism, there are two American myths that are extremely widespread. The first, popular among tourists, is that not a single Jew is left in Prague. The second, popular in the American media, is that recent years have witnessed a phoenix-like rebirth of Jewish life in the city.

The reality of the situation is far less dramatic than either scenario. Prague is by no means absent of Jews. Unfortunately, though, the great opportunity for a rebirth of Jewish life was never seized in the 1990s. There are several reasons for this. First, though, the statistics: there are 1,350 people registered in the Jewish Community of Prague, half of whom are over the age of seventy. This number represents only the active members of the Jewish Community; unofficial estimates of Prague Jews range from ten to twenty thousand. Unlike the case in America or Israel, where a plurality of Jewish life implies a diverse range of outlets for Jewish expression, the structure in most European countries - particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust - is that of a single Jewish communal structure that oversees both the religious and social affairs of the Jews.

There are various reasons why thousands of Jews in Prague do not affiliate with the Jewish Community. The first is the most obvious: For the older generations, open identification as Jews exposed them to the horrors of the Nazi era. The first thing the Germans did when they entered the Jewish Town Hall was demand a list of all registered Jews in Czechoslovakia. Later, in the 1950s and again in the '70s and '80s, state-sponsored anti-Semitism forced most Jews to hide all traces of their Jewish past. Such experiences have convinced many Jews that it is wiser to remain unaffiliated. Indeed, those Jews who did not leave the country after the Holocaust were, in most cases, people who wished to begin life anew as Czechs, without any connection to

their stigmatized religion. These attitudes toward Jewish identity have been passed, usually in subtle ways, to subsequent generations. The effect is so strong that even today, most young Czech Jews are aware of their ancestry but feel no reason to openly identify as Jews. Finally, even before the Holocaust, Czech Jews were among the most assimilated in Europe. Today's trend of disassociation is certainly extreme, but it is by no means an anomaly in modern Czech Jewish history.

But perhaps the most tragic aspect to the Community's paltry membership is that the fault lies largely with the Jewish Community leadership itself. In the entire decade following the return to democracy in Prague, the leadership of the Jewish Community has not shown itself open to new members. The attitude of the Jewish Community is no better expressed than by the Jewish Town Hall. The building, since the sixteenth century the primary symbol of Prague Jewish autonomy, is today a barricaded fortress. Visitors to Prague are often shocked when they encounter the guards - referred to in the Community as "cowboys" - who smoke cigarettes outside the building. They seem to be less interested in fending off skinheads than in protecting the building from Jews. This is not a joke. For anyone who has worked in the Prague Jewish Community, the stories are endless: Every week, varying numbers of young Jews in Prague approach the Jewish Town Hall for the first time in their lives. After being harassed by the guards, they flee from the quarter, never to return.

This might seem like an irrelevant example, but it's indicative of the Community's attitude toward Jews in Prague. Since 1989, there has not been a single outreach effort launched by the Prague Jewish Community. There has not been a single public advertisement for a Jewish event to appeal to families who fled their Jewish pasts after the Holocaust. One can explain this through recent history: The Jewish Community is run by people who were all but broken by the communist system. Whether as participants or as dissidents, the leadership was molded by an era in which Jewish life was best experienced in discretion. To these individuals, the concept of publicly promoting Judaism is akin to self-destruction. When I was organizing a Hanukkah party in 1995, I spent hours bargaining with the leaders of the Community, who insisted that there not be a single public advertisement for the event anywhere in Prague. When I pointed out the absurdity of their position, the president exclaimed, "You don't know what it was like to have 40 years of communism!" This is the paradox of the Prague Jewish Community: The horrors of the past are used not as a pivot for change in the current climate of freedom, but as a justification for apathy and neglect.

One of the only people in the Jewish Community who has struggled to prepare for the future is Chief Rabbi Karol Sidon. Rabbi Sidon labors to supply Prague with the essentials of Jewish infrastructure: a *mikveh*, kosher food, and, if his dream comes true, a Jewish day school. Unfortunately, practically all his projects are met with resistance by the bureaucrats of the Community. In addition, Rabbi Sidon himself is

not an administrator. His brainchild, a Jewish day school, was surrounded by confusion from the moment it was launched in 1997. Even the teachers did not know who was in charge. Ultimately the venerable Ronald S. Lauder Foundation stepped in to provide backing. It is hoped that with Lauder assistance, the school will come to resemble its fine counterparts elsewhere in the region. More than financial assistance, though, the Community desperately needs educational and administrative advisors. At its opening ceremony, there were ten students in the first grade; Rabbi Sidon's plan is to add a new grade in each subsequent year. It remains to be seen whether the school will actually blossom into a real Jewish day school.

In the west, Rabbi Sidon has become well known for his dissident past: A signatory of the famed "Charter 77" manifesto of dissent, Rabbi Sidon was formerly a renowned Czech novelist who was persecuted under the communist regime. Comparisons with Vaclav Havel, the playwright-president, are too tempting to avoid: Rabbi Sidon appeared to be a novelist-rabbi. But this, too, is an exaggeration. Rabbi Sidon returned to Judaism in the 1980s after studying in Heidelberg and Jerusalem. During this time, he was persuaded that the only viable expression of Jewishness was Orthodoxy. After assuming the Prague rabbinical post in 1992, Rabbi Sidon forbade religious services that are not Orthodox, and he has refused to allow the formation of non-Orthodox groups within the Prague Jewish Community. The problem is that in Prague, the majority of Jews have opted away from Orthodoxy for 150 years. Before the war, it was non-Orthodox synagogues that attracted most of Prague's affiliated Jews. In effect, the current policy prohibits the most natural form of religious expression for Czech Jews. The absurd result is that Prague has several synagogues that remain neglected and abandoned, forbidden from being used for worship.

There are those who explain this intransigence as the influence of Rabbi Sidon's former teachers in Jerusalem, who are waging a similar war against non-Orthodox Jewishness in the Jewish State. Unfortunately, the policy has had a negative effect on Prague Jewish life: the overwhelming majority of Prague's Jews are turned off by the intense Orthodoxy as practiced in the Altneuschul. The only people who attend services are a smattering of recent converts and elderly Jews from Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia. Among the worshippers in the Altneuschul on Shabbat, there is practically not a single person who was born Jewish in Prague.

In the midst of all this, the Jewish Community of Prague has silently become one of the wealthiest Jewish communities in all of Europe. Through a combination of restituted properties and tourist revenues, the Community is today a multi-million dollar enterprise. The enormous amount of capital flowing into the Community has created unprecedented opportunities for corruption and mismanagement. It is an open secret in the Jewish Community that millions of Czech crowns disappear every year. The question remains as to how many individuals are involved in the "disappearance." No matter how much clamor is raised for an independent audit of

Community finances, the leadership refuses to open its books to the public. Unfortunately, members of the Jewish Community haven't campaigned vehemently enough for action; they seem more content to gossip in outrage than to change the situation. Meanwhile, unfathomable amounts of cash are disappearing while scores of Czech Holocaust survivors subsist in poverty.

If this were the whole story, the prognosis would be bleak. By the middle of the twenty-first century, Prague Judaism would be a lucrative business enterprise without any Jews. However, various new groups have emerged in the 1990s to fill the gap left by the Jewish Community. One of the first alternative communities was *Bejt Simcha* ("House of Happiness"), which styled itself as a Reform group. *Bejt Simcha* became unpopular among some Jews when it was noticed that many, if not most, of its members were not Jewish. However, the group has sometimes served as a launching board for Jews just discovering their Jewish roots. *Bejt Simcha* continues to meet today and forms an important part of Prague Jewish life outside the Jewish Community. A larger, independent organization that caters to Jews was formed in 1995. Known as *Bejt Praba* ("House of Prague"), the organization was formed by a mixture of American and Czech Jews frustrated by the Community's stagnation and eager for an alternative to Rabbi Sidon's Orthodoxy. Calling itself the "Open Jewish Community of Prague," *Bejt Praba* has already made its presence felt with weekly Kabbalat Shabbat meetings (Rabbi Sidon has forbidden use of the word "service" because women sit with men), services on the major holidays, as well as social events throughout the year. At first, the organization was perceived as the Jewish arm of American cultural imperialism in Prague. However, after two years it became clear that *Bejt Praba* was a viable organization that would benefit Czechs as well as expatriates. Besides, even Rabbi Sidon has confessed that the future of Prague Jewish life depends on foreign expatriates. If *Bejt Praba* continues to orient itself to Prague's local Jews, it might very well become the catalyst for a renewal of Jewish life in the city. Their work is cut out for them. With the absence of a single traditional Jewish family in Prague and with a lack of Community cohesion, most Czech Jews who wish to raise Jewish families have already emigrated to Israel or to America.

Visiting Prague: The "Jewish Town" Today

Prague's Josefov district is often touted as the "Jewish Quarter" or even as the "Jewish Ghetto" of Prague. As a result, millions of tourists each year stand gaping at Josefov's buildings, wondering how such an exquisite environment could ever have brought the Jews pain. Unfortunately, the modern "Jewish Ghetto" of Prague has become one of the most misunderstood phenomena of modern Czech history.

Since the second half of the twelfth century, Jews lived in this district in an autonomous "Jewish Town." Over the years, so many houses were built that a natural enclosure was formed. Six gates were constructed not for the purpose of imprisonment, but actually to protect the Jews from the threat of pogrom. There was no wall surrounding the Jewish Town; houses were packed densely together and small fences spackled the spaces between them.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Jewish Town had become a densely populated ghetto. One street ran into a second street; narrow alleys twisted to and from courtyards were continuously subdivided to make room for more living space. Even the cemetery had become a twisting, cluttered mass of layered graves. In spite of these living conditions, the ghetto maintained a sense of Community and public order well into the nineteenth century.

Then in 1849 the Jews were finally released from the ghetto. Wealthier Jews had been trickling out of the ghetto for almost a century, but after 1849 the dam burst. A massive exodus began, with Jews moving to the Prague equivalents of the Upper West Side, Great Neck, and Rockland County. As a matter of fact, the situation was very similar to Jewish migration in the United States, where Jews left the urban ghetto as soon as they had the means to leave. The main difference was that in Prague Jewish confinement to the ghetto had been legalized, whereas in America it was due to economic circumstance. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews streamed out of the former ghetto to finer areas of the Old Town, as well as to the New Town and to the suburban district of Vinohrady. Their vacated tenements were filled by poor Praguers and by villagers looking for an opportunity in the capital.

During the next fifty years, the same phenomenon occurred in Prague as would later occur throughout the Jewish immigrant ghettos of America. Deprived of the Community cohesion of the Jews, the overcrowded streets rapidly declined and formed a modern-day slum. The population density of the ghetto was three times the Prague average. Every conceivable urban vice bred and multiplied in the seedy corners of Josefov. Taverns, brothels, casinos, gangs, garbage, rats, typhus, flooding, crime, booze, and drugs lurked in the dilapidated ghetto. Buildings could not be repaired because the question of ownership was tangled and obscure. The terrible sewage system and lack of potable water made hygiene an unheard-of luxury. Jewish writer Leo Perutz, a luminary of Kafka's generation, recorded his impressions of the ghetto at the turn of the century:

....tumbledown houses huddled together, sagging with age and in the last stages of dilapidation and decay, with extensions and shorings up that blocked the narrow streets, those wind-ing, crooked streets in the maze of which I could easily get lost if I did not take care. Dark passages, gloomy courtyards, holes in the wall and cave-like vaults in which hawkers offered their wares. Wells and cisterns, the water of which was contaminated by the Prague disease, typhus, and at every hole and

corner a den in which the Prague underworld forgathered.

Leo Perutz, *By Night under the Stone Bridge*

There were still Jews there - many Orthodox Jews did not wish to leave, and the poorest Jews had no means to escape - but ninety percent of the residents were, by this time, poor Gentiles.

Toward the end of the century, the question loomed: Should one of the glorious gems of the Hapsburg Empire - the city of Prague - be permitted to wither into a cauldron of disease and decay? In 1893, Emperor Franz Josef and the Prague municipal authorities opted for urban renewal. They passed a sanitation bill to rebuild not only the ghetto but other parts of the Old Town and New Town. Most of the work, though, was centered around slum clearance in Josefov. After the necessary real estate was acquired, the former Jewish ghetto was destroyed between 1897 and 1917.

Over the course of twenty years, some three hundred buildings were razed, replaced by just eighty-three. The twelve passageways in the ghetto were totally eliminated, and the thirty-one narrow streets reduced to ten. The streets you see today might appear narrow, but by European old town standards, they're relatively wide. The new buildings became choice real estate in Prague in the early twentieth century.

After the destruction of three Baroque synagogues, Czech historical preservation societies fought for the protection of Jewish landmarks. As a result, the six remaining synagogues, the Jewish Town Hall, and most of the cemetery were preserved. Since the Altneuschul and the adjacent Jewish Town Hall were not torn down, the narrow alley between them, Cervena Street, can give you some idea of the size of the ghetto's former streets. Also, a quick look at the overcrowded cemetery, with its winding paths and thousands of graves stretching from the Klausen Synagogue to the Pinchas Synagogue, gives a picture in microcosm of how the ghetto looked. Everywhere else, though, the "Jewish Town" is really a twentieth-century city. Parizska Street, named in honor of the early twentieth-century Parisian architecture that inspired its buildings, stretches from the Old Town Square to the Vltava River and is indeed the antithesis of a ghetto: Storefronts can cost upwards of two thousand dollars a month. The avenue covers up Wood Square, which once stood in front of the Altneuschul and allowed sunlight into its windows in the early morning. The Zigeuner Synagogue, where Franz Kafka celebrated his Bar Mitzvah, was situated on the site of today's Intercontinental Hotel parking lot. Had the Intercontinental stood there at the time, Kafka could have had his reception inside! Other priceless buildings now lost include the Renaissance palace of Jacob Bashevi, the first Hapsburg Jew ever to be ennobled.

The slum clearance begot a century of wavering reflection: Were the city planners insensitive to the ghetto's original flavor? Were certain buildings unnecessarily destroyed? Did the gentrification destroy a vital piece of Prague's history? On the

other hand, wasn't the clearance necessary to stop the spread of disease?

For the purposes of this book, the slum clearance is important because the area is no longer either a "Jewish Ghetto" or a "Jewish Town." The few Jews who remain in Prague are now spread throughout the city. All we have in Josefov today are isolated islands of a Jewish past: the island of thirteenth-century Jewish life as seen in the Altneuschul, the island of sixteenth-century Jewish life as seen in the Maisel Synagogue, and so forth. The rest is the twentieth century. Today we can walk the geography of the ghetto, but the topography has vanished forever.

NOTE: Diehard visitors who seek a true picture of the ghetto in the early nineteenth century are advised to visit the Prague Municipal Museum, which houses an awe-inspiring scale model of Prague from that era. [See page 145.]

The Jurassic Park of Judaism

Mass murder constitutes the background of this museum, and the collections are by no means a symbol, but a very real document of the totality of human carnage.
Hana Voiavkova, *A Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague*

Today's visitor to Prague encounters one of the richest Jewish museum collections on the entire continent. No less than three synagogues and a ceremonial hall have been converted into sprawling showcases of objects depicting Jewish history and tradition.

Because of the enormity of the exhibition, one is tempted to credit the museum's origins to Jewish prosperity in Bohemia or to the charity of a great philanthropist. In fact, almost all the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague were assembled from 1942-43 by the infamous "Museum of an Extinct Race," administered by the Nazis. This is why Prague's former Jewish Town escaped destruction during the war. It was to be both playground and exhibition center of the museum envisioned by the Nazis. Thus while the Nazis destroyed the physical landmarks of Judaism throughout Europe, they actively guarded the synagogues and cemetery in the Josefov district of Prague. Due to their methodology, the sites, if not the people, were to be protected and saved in Jewish Prague.

The "Museum of an Extinct Race," as it was later called, has been blanketed in mystery since its origin. There has been no definitive history written on the topic. However, the major outlines of this most bizarre period in Prague Jewish history are known. When large scale transports to death camps began in 1942, a wealth of Jewish

property was left behind. It occurred to several Jewish scholars to save all specifically Jewish objects from theft or destruction through the creation of a special museum in Prague. The new museum would continue the work of the original Jewish Museum founded in Prague in 1906. Of course, operating as it was in the eye of the Holocaust, the museum's priorities were unique: would focus on collecting and cataloging the sediments of Jewish life. It thus became the mandate of the wartime museum to preserve as much as possible of Jewish civilization even as that civilization was being destroyed.

It was when the scholars presented their idea to the Nazis that the Jewish Museum became a perverse partner to genocide. The Nazis accepted the proposal, on the condition that they would dictate the orientation of the museum. They had no intention of creating a memorial to Jewish life, but rather an exhibition to justify genocide: After the war, the collections of Judaica culled from Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and elsewhere would form the core of a museum that would illustrate the supposed barbarism of the Jewish people. Here the visitors would silently rejoice over the progress of civilization. The Czech Jewish writer Jiri Weil, who worked for a short time in the wartime museum, later described it as follows: "The museum was supposed to be a victory memorial, for the objects displayed here belonged to a race scheduled for annihilation. Nothing would remain of that race but these dead things" (Jiri Weil, *Mendelssohn Is on the Roof*). The exhibits would be situated in the former synagogues in Prague, thus maximizing the contextual experience intended for the visitors.

As envisioned by the Nazis, the Museum would work like this: Aryan tourists, on vacation in Prague, would be able to step into the world of a long-extirpated people. From the ancient Jewish cemetery to the sundry synagogues in Prague, the visitors would wander through a caricatured microcosm of that which had been destroyed. The streets of Josefov would be converted, once again, into a teeming "Jewish Town" that would feature tourist entertainment mixed with historical artifact. In this way it would resemble the colonial village at Williamsburg, Virginia, or an Epcot Center of Jews, or - more precisely, since the Jews would be extinct - the Jurassic Park of Judaism. According to one account, the Nazis even planned to hire Czechs to dress up as Hasidic Jews and to walk the streets of Jewish Town *a la* Mickey Mouse, making the experience all the more tangible for European tourists whose only glimpse of Jews would be in picture books.

These were not merely the pipe dreams of the Gestapo. The "Central Jewish Museum in Prague," as the Nazi-era museum was known, planned and executed several exhibitions in Prague's synagogues even while the war was waging. The Nazis actually paid for the restoration of these synagogues so that they would be suitable museum sites. Thus, in 1942, an exhibition of rare Hebrew books was installed in the High Synagogue. The women's section of the Altneuschul hosted a photographic

exhibition detailing the building's early Gothic history. The Ceremonial Hall became a "Museum of the Prague Ghetto," and the Klausen Synagogue featured an exhibition on "Jewish Life from the Cradle to the Grave. In each of the exhibitions, the museum curators attempted to depict Judaism in a warm and humane light, offering Jewish values as a telling contrast to the barbarity of Nazi ideology. The Nazis, meanwhile, repeatedly ordered changes in the exhibits to focus more brazenly on the atavistic characteristics of a savage people. They insisted, for instance, on featuring pseudo-vampiric models depicting kosher slaughter and circumcision, two Jewish customs vilified by the Nazis.

As more and more Jewish homes and synagogues were emptied of their inhabitants, the collections of the Central Museum flourished. Even after most of the curators were murdered toward the end of the war, thousands of ritual objects continued to flow into the Central Jewish Museum. By the end of the war the Museum had expanded from one Jewish Community building to eight. It housed more than 30,000 objects and over 100,000 books from all over Europe, but particularly from the 153 decimated Czech-Jewish communities. More than 50 warehouses were filled with the inanimate objects of Judaism.

In 1950, the Jewish Museum was nationalized; it was only restituted to the Jews in 1994. Nonetheless, the museum continues to be haunted by its past legacy. Today, the Jewish Museum possesses six priceless Torah curtains for every registered Jew in Prague. The overwhelming majority of these objects were literally stolen from people who were murdered. Each item should be seen to represent one of the 153 Czech Jewish Communities destroyed in the Holocaust. Indeed, the objects would not be here today had it not been for the Nazi scheme to make a theme park out of genocide. As you walk through today's synagogue-museums in Prague, it is important to keep in mind the tainted origin of the otherwise luxurious items. The dual-perspective of this museum - on the one hand, the objects are treasures; on the other hand, they are stained with blood - creates a murky trial for today's visitor to Jewish Prague. Where relevant, I have given a brief account of each synagogue's wartime exhibition.

Finally, as you amble through the streets of the former Jewish Town, you might be startled by the masses of European Gentile tourists crowding into the Jewish sites. In the years following the demise of Communism, Prague's Jewish Quarter has become one of the city's most popular tourist attractions. One wonders why these tourists seem starved for a glimpse of Jewish civilization. Perhaps the visitors come from cities whose Jewish quarters have long since been destroyed; perhaps they are moved by guilt pangs for the crimes of an earlier generation. Regardless of the reason, it has become a bizarre irony of history that the "Museum of an Extinct Race" is flourishing today. Officially only 1,350 Jews live in Prague, but each year the Jewish Quarter is swamped with millions of tourists who hail from countries that, not too long ago,

were complicitous in genocide. (A cynic might remark that they have replaced their machine guns with camcorders.) It is chilling that the Nazi dream of a Jewish fairy land without Jews has become, essentially, a reality.