

The Prague Ghetto

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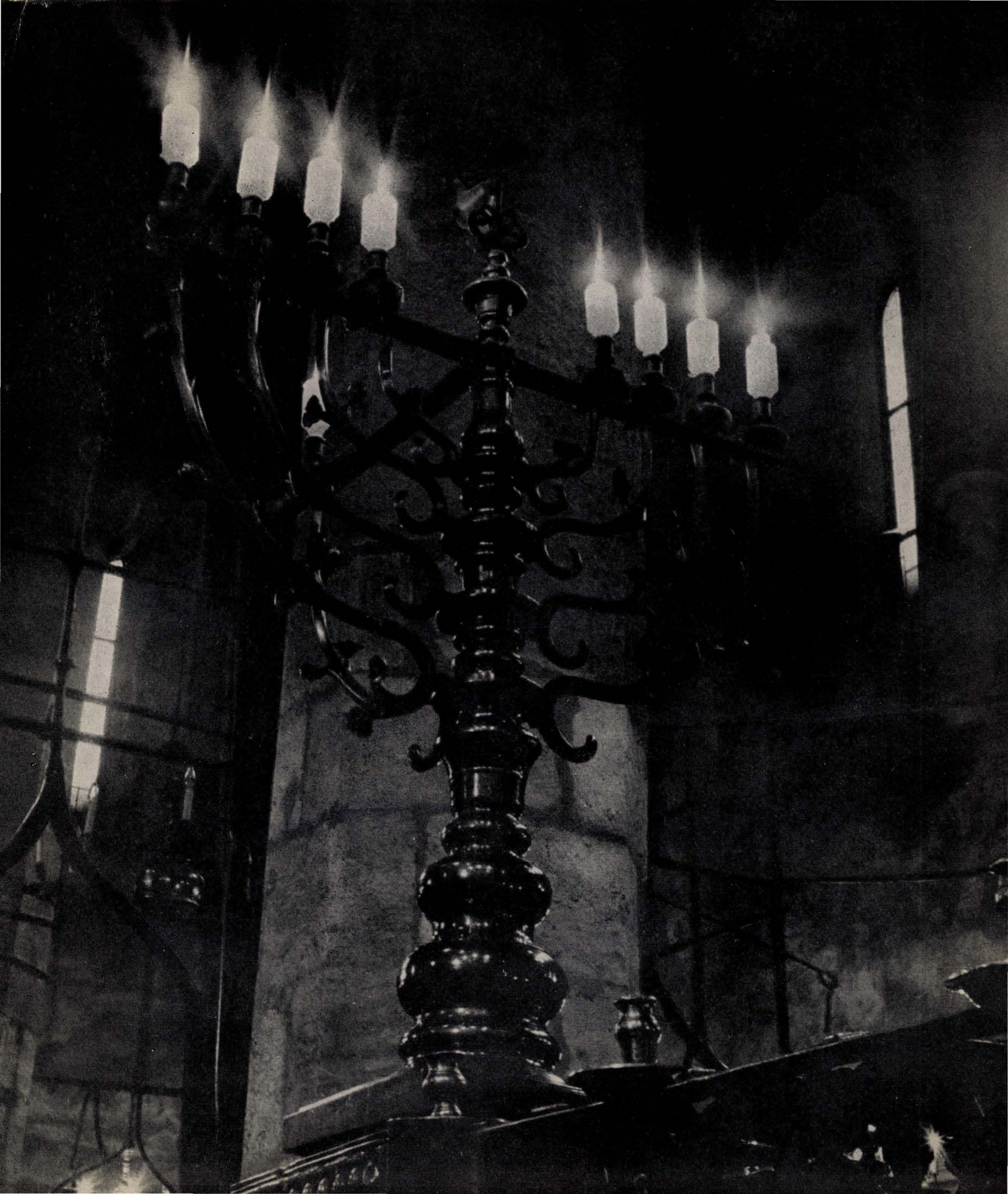
TRANSLATED BY JEAN LAYTON

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Origins

The old Prague ghetto was without doubt the most famous and celebrated Jewish settlement of the entire Diaspora. This was largely due to the wisdom of its numerous scholars, whose fame and renown spread far beyond the walls of the ghetto, the boundaries of Bohemia and the coasts of Europe. It was also known for the special character of the life of its inhabitants—which differed from that of other Jewish communities—and, last but not least, for its many historically memorable and architecturally interesting buildings, some of which have been preserved to this day. They are some of the oldest architectural monuments in Prague and are an important guide to Bohemia's contribution to the treasury of the European art of building.

A walk through the district that formerly constituted the Jewish Town is one that still provides a glimpse of the variety and richness of the ecclesiastical and secular architecture of the past. The eye of the wanderer rests on unique architectural treasures, silent witnesses to the dexterity and skill of the hands and brains of past generations: the early Gothic Old-New Synagogue, the Renaissance Pinkas and High Synagogues, the Early Baroque architecture of the Klaus Synagogue, the Rococo restoration of the Jewish Town Hall and the Rococo, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Empire style tombs of the Old Jewish Cemetery. Within this fairly small area the many alternating styles testify to a very high level of skill. The former Prague ghetto district has, in fact, become a museum corner preserving the heritage of over forty generations who lived and worked there during the course of more than 1,000 years. Of course there are not many of these old treasures still left today. The pulling down of the old houses and the reconstruction and levelling of the river banks at the beginning of this century, which was designed to eliminate a poor and unhygienic community of poor people, succeeded in removing the picturesque individuality of the Jewish Town, condemned many valuable buildings to be pulled down and replaced them with commonplace blocks of apartment houses

that in no way differed from the other parts of Prague. If we want to get an idea of what the old Prague ghetto looked like, we have to turn to old books or to the plans and photographs which have been preserved in the unique archives of the State Jewish Museum.

Even so, the few remaining treasures in these otherwise strange and uncongenial surroundings have preserved a magic and charm that makes a walk through the streets of the former Jewish Town an unforgettable experience. In the old days, there used to be many people in Prague who could recall some legend or tale about each memorable historic building, about each place that had played a role at some time or other in history. The same was true of the Prague ghetto, where there was sure to be one of the innumerable legends linked not only with the Jewish Town as a whole but also with each individual house and stone that has been preserved. Not so long ago many an old man could tell an entrancing tale about each house sign, sometimes based on fact, but more often on fantasy, which threw light on the origin of the old relics of the ghetto.

These *raconteurs* are no longer alive today. But the legends live on, legends told by father to son, from generation to generation. We know that such tales have often nothing in common with reality, but one enjoys returning to the years of one's childhood and listening to fantastic legendary events of long ago.

It is to one of these legends that we must turn when seeking for the first mention or note of the presence of Jews in Prague. According to legend, they settled on the site of the present-day capital of Czechoslovakia more than 1,000 years ago. Princess Libuše, legendary founder of Prague, is supposed to have had a vision in which she saw a small community seeking asylum in her principality. Before she died, she confided this prophecy of hers to her successor and advised him to give help and protection to these people, as it would bring luck and blessing to the entire country.

Ten years later the Wends overran Lithuania and the surrounding regions, driving out the inhabitants, including a Jewish community. Its members wandered for more than ten years until finally they arrived in Bohemia in 850. Weary from their troubles and long wandering, they begged an audience of the local prince, in which they asked for his protection and promised to be his faithful devoted subjects.

Remembering Libuše's prophecy, the Bohemian prince granted their request and offered them a place of habitation on the left bank of the River Vltava. Thus, according to legend, Jews were settled in Bohemia at a time when Christianity was scarcely known there. They remained true to their word, as the ancient Bohemian chronicler, Kosmas, relates, for they supported the prince in his battles and were useful to him in many other ways.

By the year 900 the number of Jews had grown so fast that the site originally allotted to them no longer sufficed and they therefore begged for another site. The prince assigned them the area on the right bank of the Vltava, which is now known as the district of Prague I, or the Old Town. This extensive area thus became the home of the Jewish community and the needy were generously helped by the prince to build their houses. Thus the foundations were laid of what was later to become the Jewish ghetto.

So much for legend. Every historical event of which there are no written or other documentary proofs is bound to be interwoven with a number of myths, which evolved no one knows how or when. There are certain proofs, however, that Jews were really present at the time of the founding and early beginnings of Prague.

It so happened that when they left their original homeland and went into exile their supreme council, the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, proclaimed that the divorce of a Jewish couple could only be approved by Elders of a community lying between two rivers (apparently because rivers did not change their names as often as towns), and one of the oldest such divorce papers preserved—now the property of the Prague State Jewish Museum—is marked with the title Praga-Mezigradi.

Prior to the founding of Prague, the settlement on the site of the present capital city of the Czechoslovak Republic bore the name Mezigradi, and lay between the Botič and Vltava rivers. From this one can deduce that there was a settlement of Jews here prior to the time of the legend describing how Princess Libuše founded Prague as a fortified castle dominating the Bohemian lands. It is referred to by the Arabian Jew, Ibrahim Ibn Jacub, in his famous account of his travels about the year 950, when he brought a message from the Moorish caliphate of North Africa through Spain to the Emperor Otto II in Germany, whom he reached by travelling through Bohemia. At that time, in the area now covered by present-day Prague, there were only two castles (the one 'On the ridge', i. e. the present-day Hradčany, and the Vyšehrad across the river), a settlement below the castle and the market by the river ford. And according to Ibn Jacub, he met with Jewish traders at the market-place of this town, which was well-built and of stone.

According to the most modern research, the settlement of Jews in Prague took place in a similar way to the arrival of Christianity in Bohemia, namely from two directions, from East and West, from France and from the Byzantine Empire. The Bohemian kings profited considerably from their Jewish colonists, for they founded a commercial tradition in Prague which became famous far beyond the bounds of the Bohemian lands.

At first the Jews lived in complete freedom in Prague below the castle, '*Na Opyši*—On the Ridge'. Up to the time of the crusades in the twelfth century they continued to live in freedom, but were concentrated on the right bank of the river, in fact on the site of what later became the ghetto. It was only in the thirteenth century that they were proclaimed by edict of the Lateran Council to be slaves of the Holy Roman Empire, the property of its rulers, and, as 'servants of the royal household', were forced to wear a humiliating sign which marked them out from the rest of the population. But we should not anticipate events, so let us return to the Prague of the twelfth century.

In 1150 the Jewish town was attacked by a sect which had just been exiled from the country by the Bohemian king of that time. Being too weak to oppose the royal will, they sought out the Jews as the object of their revenge. At the first sounds of shouting and screams, the Jewish butchers rushed out with their choppers and drove the attackers from the town. As a reward the king permitted them to add the double-tailed Bohemian lion to their emblem, a privilege which was confirmed by all succeeding Bohemian kings. In addition, the king allowed the Jews

to fortify their town with bastions to protect themselves against similar attacks. With these bastions the Jewish town took the shape of a fortified ghetto, which in time became one of the most famous Jewish settlements in Europe. Later, the growth of this quarter was halted by ecclesiastical order and was finally enclosed by huge gates. And its inhabitants, in spite of the storms and disturbances that shook Bohemia, lived there for several centuries in comparative peace and quiet.

The Old-New Synagogue

The best-known treasure, still preserved, of the ancient Jewish Town is the famous Old-New Synagogue, which is the oldest in Europe after that of Worms. Theories about its age used to differ greatly: they varied from the first half of the eighth to the second half of the thirteenth century. It has now been ascertained that it was built right on the outskirts of the Town, close beside two of its gates, at the time when the Prague Jewish quarter was being completed.

Originally the old Jewish settlement in Prague had only one small wooden synagogue. Each Saturday and on religious holidays the believers would try to crowd into it, and many of them failed to do so. As legend has it, the Elders of the Prague Jewish Community therefore met and decided to build a beautiful stone House of God. There was a long dispute as to where it should be situated, for its position had to be one in keeping with such an important building. Finally they thought of a piece of raised ground covered with rubbish, which they unanimously decided was the best and most suitable place. The ground had to be levelled so as not to stand out from the surrounding land.

Shortly after this memorable meeting the Elders set labourers to work, watched by the inquisitive eyes of the boys of the entire neighbourhood. As soon as they left their work at dusk, the site became a children's paradise, where they thought up a hundred and one different games and races. But one day one of the more adventurous boys fell over a rock and hurt himself. Naturally he said nothing about it at home and the boys decided that next day they would dig up the rock and remove it themselves, for another accident like that might result in a good hiding.

The following day, however, when they tried to dig it up, they discovered that it was not what they thought. Instead of rock they uncovered a piece of masonry, which grew bigger and bigger as they scraped away the sand, and it was impossible to remove it. This was too much even for

the boys and that evening they revealed their discovery to their parents. Of course it was not long before the Council of Elders heard about it and the labourers were ordered to uncover the whole secret of the discovery. The masonry turned out to be a wall of ancient hewn stone, and this gave rise to the idea that perhaps there had once been some other place of worship there. It was not long before the idea was confirmed by the finding of a scroll of writing on old parchment.

Should the stone serve as the foundation for the building of the new synagogue, or should it be removed and a new hewn stone put in its place? Was it right to remove it or should the new sanctuary be placed a few steps further on? Superstition and respect for old relics were so strong among the members of the Council of Elders that inevitably there was a dispute.

At that time there happened to be two messengers from the community of Jerusalem in Prague, collecting money to support the poor of the Holy City. Both were renowned for their knowledge of the Talmud and therefore the Prague Jews asked them to decide what should be done with the stones they had discovered.

'It's quite clear,' maintained the men from Jerusalem, 'that Jews also lived and built a sanctuary here at the time of the Jerusalem Temple. Therefore use the stones for the new building and build it according to the pattern of the temple in Jerusalem, with windows with narrow openings inside and widening out towards the outside, as it is intended that the light of the synagogue should penetrate the outside world. The interior should be built so that steps lead down to its lowest part, for it is said that "From the depths I call to Thee, O Lord!" If you build a synagogue in this way, the Almighty will hear you and the House will protect you from fire and water.'

Apparently the Prague Jews took their advice, for from that time the synagogue has had not only both these features, but owing to its central position it became the symbol and centre of the Prague Jewish Town. Some experts maintain that the name Old-New developed precisely from the fact that the new part of the building was built on top of the old one, which had been uncovered by the children at play. Others, again, maintain that it is a vague expression that arose from the translation of the German word *alt-neu*, whereas the correct term *at tnai* is the Hebrew term 'on certain conditions', that in fact the building of the synagogue was allowed on certain conditions, and this, in turn, has been the basis of several other legends which are interwoven into the history of the Old-New Synagogue. The origin of the name and the origin of the building itself, however, remain quite uncertain to this day. According to historical research it probably dates back to the time of Přemysl Otakar II, the great defender of human rights in Bohemia, who was the first to issue the *privilegia* defining the rights and obligations of the Jewish inhabitants, thus giving the Jewish Township a feeling of protection and safety. In that case the synagogue would date from the beginning of the second half of the thirteenth century.

There has not been much change since the time it was constructed. The visitor enters through iron gates, beyond which he descends a few steps below the level of the street. The broad passage

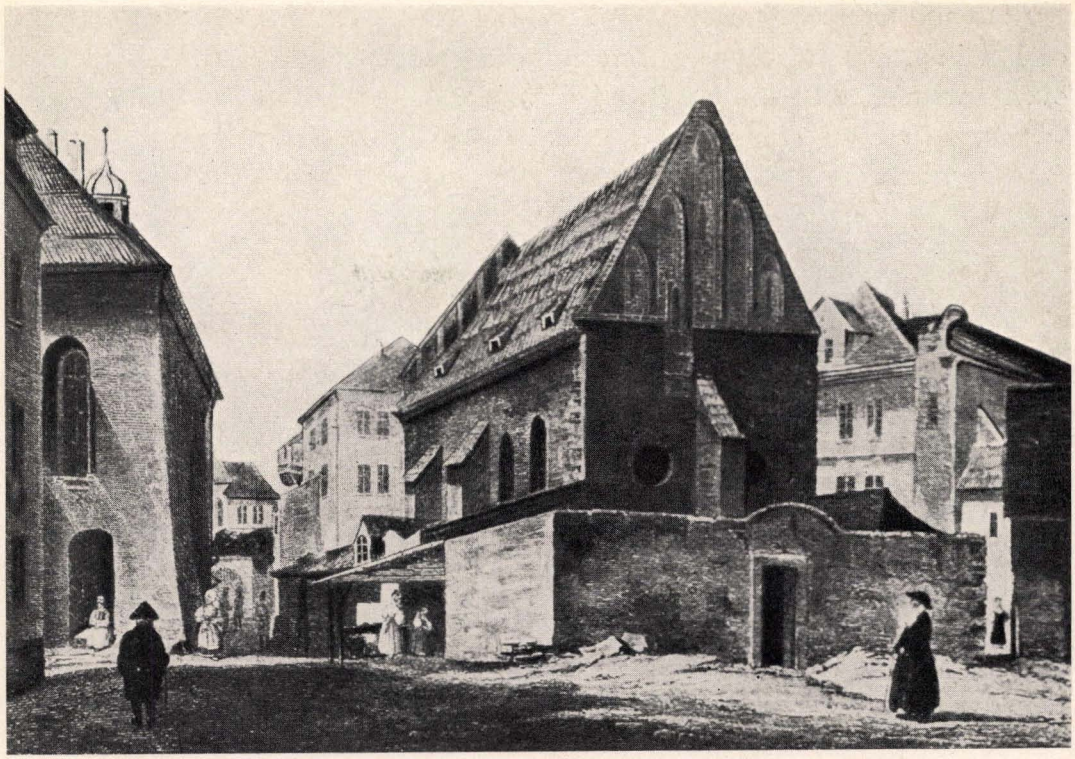
A unique photograph of the Old-New Synagogue with a fountain where, today, there is one of the busiest arteries of the Old Town, the broad, modern Paris Avenue.



lies in front of him, with its oblong stone bench which formerly served—as in all other synagogues—as a place of education for the young, who for lack of secular schools acquired their knowledge of life from the rabbis in the temples of the Lord. Beyond the heavy wooden doors, above which there is an arch of exquisite stone ornamentation, one comes into the actual sanctuary itself. And, as the legend relates, the dull, opaque rays of light pierce its gloomy interior through high window apertures, narrow on the inside and widening towards the outside world; the cantor stands in a small hollowed-out square before the screen with the torah scrolls, from whence he can call out his prayers 'from the depths'. There is an interesting Gothic arch complete with a fifth arm, so breaking the normal pattern of four arms in the shape of a cross, which would be inappropriate in a synagogue. In the centre is the nave bordered by a grating



The most ancient preserved relic of the old ghetto—the Gothic Old-New Synagogue as it is today.



A drawing of the Old-New Synagogue from the time, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the rebuilding and replanning of that area changed its aspect and that of the entire Joseph Quarter.

around which sit the congregation during services, on individual wooden seats placed against the inside walls of the building. In the eighteenth century a wide gallery was built on to the rear walls of the synagogue for the women, who—according to orthodox precept—were not allowed to sit in the same room with their men folk during religious services. They could only watch—unseen by the men—through the narrow slits in the solid walls which widen out towards the main hall, so as not to distract the attention and concentration of the men while at prayer.

By adhering strictly to religious custom and its own way of life the Prague ghetto, despite all kinds of external attacks, fires and floods, preserved its original town plan till almost the middle of the nineteenth century. The most striking thing about this was the fact that the Prague Jewish Town was made up of two independently designed parts, which did not link up or overlap for a very long period. One part consisted of the groups of houses round the Old School, the other centred on the Old-New Synagogue. When they finally linked up, the Old-New Synagogue, together with the adjacent Jewish Town Hall—the only Jewish Town Hall in all the lands of the Diaspora—became, and to this day remain, the symbol and centre of one of the most famous Jewish communities of all, recognised by Jews all over the world as '*Ir veem ba Israel*—City and Mother in Israel.' The darkened colour of its walls may never be whitened, as they are blackened by the blood of countless Jewish martyrs, who fled to the synagogue in time of need and perished there.

The Old-New Synagogue has lasted through the ages. As a testimony to past suffering and past

glories and as a symbol of the continuity of the famous Prague community, it stands today as of old in the centre of the district, whose every stone could tell of a past rich in memorable events witnessed in the course of centuries.

The Legend of a Rebel

When walking through the area that used to be the old Prague ghetto, the wanderer comes across an interesting phenomenon. In Joseph Street, close by what was formerly the main entrance to the old Jewish Cemetery, the road descends suddenly to a low mossy wall, behind which there is a rather unpretentious building. Hardly a soul would imagine that this place is a building worth attention. And yet, it is the famous Pinkas Synagogue, where excavations and the discovery of the original ground-plan have shown it to be only a little more recent than the Old-New Synagogue itself. Behind its not very striking exterior it hides an interesting interior arched with cross vaulting and stone groins. The 177 seats for men, 100 seats for women and 143 seats on the balcony show that it is not as small as it looks from the outside.

The story goes that the synagogue was built in 1479 on an empty, uninhabited plot of waste land by a rabbi Pinkas of a family of rebellious Pinkases, who had probably had some quarrel with the older inhabitants living round the Old-New Synagogue. In the dark unnamed streets of that time, where houses had no numbers or house signs, the Jewish synagogues, in contrast to Christian churches, were never closed. Even though the Pinkas Synagogue could not compete with its much more illustrious forerunner, the Old-New Synagogue, beside which there was a square enclosed by irregularly built houses with shops and stalls serving as the central market of the ghetto, it nevertheless stood there, a new private synagogue, on a spot in keeping with the importance of the Lord's Tabernacle. On looking at the sunken ground it seems almost unbelievable to us today. Yet we must not forget that the earth brought down each year by the then uncontrolled River Vltava raised the level of the ground in Prague so that already by the sixteenth century one would have had to descend right below the level of the surrounding neighbourhood to enter the Pinkas Synagogue. And though, later, the floor of the synagogue was raised, it still stands today two or three yards below the level of the adjoining Joseph Street.

According to other sources the Pinkas Synagogue was supposed to have been founded much earlier by a Jew of the royal court, treasurer to the ruler, Přemysl Otakar II, whose name—Pinkas—has been preserved to this day. It was a time when many laws were relaxed, when the sovereign allowed the Jews extensive privileges and they acquired partial civil rights. As the ghetto grew, the gates and defence works of the Jewish Town were multiplied and pushed out so as to protect the Jews against attacks by other sections of the population. The builders could hardly have guessed at that time that six centuries later these would be valiantly defended by fanatical rabbis as a protection against assimilation, at the time when the walls between the Jewish quarter and the rest of the city were to be pulled down so that both parts could be joined in an indivisible whole.

But again we are anticipating. So far we have been speaking of a legendary event that is supposed to have taken place in the second half of the thirteenth century, when the building of the Pinkas Synagogue marked an important milestone in the construction of the Jewish Town. With the passage of time other legends were also woven round the story of the origin of this, the second oldest synagogue of the Prague ghetto, each being handed on from generation to generation, each distorting its uncertain origins and thus becoming part of the overflowing well of legends about the history of the Czech Jews.

According to one of these stories a poor Jew named Pinkas lived with his family in the Prague Jewish Town at some period during the thirteenth century. He earned his living by buying and selling second-hand clothes. This pedlar's life was not, of course, remunerative enough to cover his needs, and Pinkas was so poor that had it not been for his good-hearted patron, a rich count, who had taken a fancy to him on account of his honesty, he and his wife and family would have died long before of hunger. The count, however, made Pinkas give him an account of what he needed to spend before the Sabbath and before every religious holiday, and by letting him have these amounts he enabled Pinkas to live a quiet, modest life.

Pinkas, being very religious, however, considered the monetary gifts from the count to have been sent to him by God himself and therefore always thanked the count for them in the same words: 'O Lord, who hast never forsaken Thy children in need, I humbly thank Thee, that Thou hast again come to my aid.'

The count, of course, was annoyed that Pinkas considered his gifts to be a blessing from God and that he did not recognise his Excellency as his benefactor. 'Well, I'll punish him for it,' he decided once, when he found Pinkas's thanks to God particularly irksome. So shortly before the Feast of the Passover he refused his regular support.

'I am afraid that this time I can't contribute anything,' he told Pinkas, when the latter presented his usual holiday account for the Feast. 'I am in financial difficulties myself, but I am convinced that your God will help you in some other way.'

The Pinkas Synagogue in the Old Town, lying deep below the level of the surrounding streets, which have gradually been raised by sand brought down through the centuries by the near-by River Vltava.



This was a great blow, and when Pinkas arrived home and announced the sad news to his wife and children, the place resounded with wailing and tears. 'True, it'll be a sad holiday,' he added, 'but we'll manage somehow. Surely the Lord God will help us again.'

The Feast Day was fast approaching. Throughout the Jewish Town people were feverishly buying and preparing; everyone was in a good mood. Women were spring cleaning, men made their last purchases and the children could hardly wait for the ceremonial supper on the eve of the Festival. Only the Pinkas family was sad. They had not even enough for the most essential purchases. And then, as the whole family was sitting round the empty table one evening, a strange thing happened. Suddenly the window rattled and a heavy object flew into the dark room. They all jumped up to see what it could be. They looked and were amazed. For they were gazing down on a horrible creature, which filled the mother and children with fear.

'It's a dead monkey!' said the father after a while, for he was the first to pull himself together. 'It's sure to be some trick or other by which they want to ruin us. Probably someone wants to throw the blame on us for killing it. Who knows who its owner can have been? We must get rid of it as quickly as possible, unobserved.'

That, of course, was more easily said than done. How could one get rid of such a creature without being seen by anyone.

'We must chop it up and burn it,' advised his wife, who always had a practical solution for everything. But as they were dragging it over the floor towards the stove where they were going to burn it, a gold coin suddenly fell from the monkey's mouth. Pinkas hurriedly felt the creature's belly and discovered it was full and solid. So they carefully cut it open and to their immense delight, found that the stomach was full of gold ducats.

Glory be to God! The children hopped round the dismembered creature, the mother wept with emotion, and the father quickly wrote down a list for to-morrow's shopping, as they would still have time to prepare the ceremonial supper before the Passover. Early next morning he went to the market and brought home meat and wine, as much as they could wish for, a new gold embroidered cap for his wife, and new clothes for the children; by the afternoon they were all prepared for the coming of the Festival like the other inhabitants of the Jewish Town.

Dusk had just fallen as they sat down dressed in their best at the festive table. Before them lay a circular bowl and three matzos loafs wrapped in a white cloth. On this were hard-boiled eggs, watercress, horse-radish, a bowl of salt water and a piece of roast meat, as is demanded by the customs of the Feast. Then they all put their hand to the bowl, lifted it up and said: 'This is the bread of the poor, as was eaten by our forefathers in the land of Egypt. Whosoever is hungry, let him come in and partake of it with us.'

They had hardly finished speaking when someone knocked on the door and the count came into the room. In the first instant they thought that the prophet Elijah had arrived, for whom,

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An artist's brush has covered the entire inner walls of the Pinkas Synagogue with the names of those murdered during the war, arranged in alphabetical order according to their last place of domicile.



as was customary, they had poured a silver goblet full of wine. But when they saw it was the count, they invited him to join in their supper. 'Indeed, I would have invited myself, had you not done so,' he added, feeling rather irked at not knowing where they had succeeded in getting all these good things without his support. 'But first of all, you must explain where you found the money for all this.'

'God comes to our help when things are worst,' replied Pinkas and told the count the story of the dead monkey. 'Good gracious, that must have been my monkey!' cried the count agitatedly, when he had heard the whole story. 'It disappeared some days ago and I had no idea what had happened to it. Now I understand it all. I have a habit of testing the genuineness of gold coins between my teeth and the monkey, who has often watched me doing it, was probably trying to imitate me. It thought, of course, that I swallowed the coins, and so ate the money. When its belly was full, it just died!'

Hearing this, Pinkas left the room and brought in the remaining coins, of which there were still plenty in spite of his extensive purchases. He wanted to return them to their rightful owner, but the latter would not accept them.

'My servant seems to have tried to play an unsuccessful trick,' he remarked. 'Now I see you were right in maintaining that you would celebrate the Festival somehow, even without my help. The money is yours, and all I ask is to be allowed to celebrate the joyful evening with you.'

Apparently Pinkas did not relax his painstaking diligence; he worked honestly and won the respect and confidence of the other inhabitants of the Jewish Town. He was elected mayor of the community, the street he lived in was named after him, and the synagogue which he had built bears his name to this day.

That, at least, is how legend tells the story of the second oldest Prague synagogue, which commemorates the name of its builder, though it is not known precisely who he was or when he lived.

The restoration of this ancient monument to its original form was commenced in 1950, for it contains all the characteristics of synagogical architecture of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The building itself has been dedicated as a memorial to the 77,297 Jewish victims of Nazi persecution in Bohemia and Moravia and their names are inscribed on the inner walls. It is one of the most fascinating buildings preserved from the days of the old Prague and its founder surely never dreamt that in building this synagogue he was not only building this memorial to himself, but also one to the tens of thousands of members of a generation that knew his name just from hearsay and legend.

An Invisible Monument

The tourist, wandering through the most varied regions of the world, visits many a famous building during his travels, photographs many a monument, and does not fail to look at the museums. These are all memorials to past glory, yet lauding life. How surprising that the same tourist rarely remembers the creators of this glory and only considers it a fool's errand to visit their last resting places. What is there to see in a cemetery? They're all the same, one grave like the next, with minor differences in shape and size of tombstone. We should scarcely be surprised, then, that in the hunt for vivid sensation he does not bother to visit cemeteries.

And yet there is one cemetery which, in this respect, is an exception. It is the ancient Prague Jewish cemetery. Not that it presents a more beautiful appearance than other cemeteries. On the contrary. The gravestones are unattractive and decaying with age, the paths are asymetrical and overgrown. And yet its abundant history, its glorious past, interwoven as it is in the innumerable legends and personal glory of those buried there in twelve layers, one above the other, have made it one of the most frequently visited memorials in Prague.

These twelve layers are there because religious precept forbade the disturbing of the cemetery. For lack of further land, in the days of the ghetto, there was nothing to be done but to cover the graves with new earth so that the cemetery could continue in use. That was how this rarity—twelve layers of graves one above the other—came into being. The old gravestones were each lifted to the new level and that explains the close rows of gravestones, between which, in many places, the visitor can scarcely make his way. Some of the stones have, of course, also been covered with earth and others just thrust their tops out of the ground.

As you wander through the streets of the former Prague Jewish ghetto admiring the façades and archways of the sumptuous buildings and ancient synagogues, at one point—in the neighbourhood of the Old-New Synagogue and the Old Town Hall—you come across an almost

modern-looking wall. It gives no hint of what lies behind it. In its simplicity it speaks of the twentieth century. But if you pass through its narrow entrance, you suddenly stand in the past of long ago. Mighty trees, with great branching tops bend low over the gravestones, as if trying to preserve the past centuries for the present. Their leaves rustle quietly in the breeze and their thick branches provide safe refuge for dozens of rooks and crows.

The Old Jewish Cemetery has two things in common with the Old-New Synagogue, namely an inaccurate name and uncertainty about the precise date of its foundation. The discovery of a gravestone to Sarah Katz, who was supposed to have lived in the seventh century, and two other stones which are supposed to date from the tenth century, has proved to be inaccurate. The oldest known memorial on which it is possible to distinguish a date carries the inscription 23. 4. 1439. It is a square gravestone in memory of an eye-witness of the great anti-Jewish pogrom in Prague of 1389. It is dedicated to the poet, Avigdor Karo, who wrote the beautiful heart-rending elegy and prayer of atonement in connection with this event, which is read to this day in the Prague synagogues. It is possible that the cemetery is much older, but either its first stones are completely buried underground or it was not the custom before that time to set up gravestones.

'The Old Jewish Cemetery' is therefore one of the newer Jewish cemeteries in Prague, and on old maps was marked as 'The New Jewish Burial Ground'. Some time ago an old burial ground was found in the neighbourhood of the Church of St Giles, which by various indications seems to have been neither Slavonic nor Germanic. In fact it is generally taken to have been a Jewish burial ground. The first historically authentic Jewish cemetery in Prague was the 'Jewish Garden' on the site of the present New Town and it was the common property of all the Prague and country Jews of the kingdom of Bohemia. It was founded during the reign of Přemysl Otakar II in the thirteenth century at an important crossroads outside the ramparts of the Old Town. In the second half of the fourteenth century, when Emperor Charles IV founded the New Town, he also permitted Jews to settle there, and they were granted the same rights and privileges as other citizens at that time. The Jews, however, took little advantage of this offer, preferring to remain amidst their fellow-believers. Later, in the fifteenth century, during the Hussite Wars, when the Old and New Towns took sides and started fighting, burials in the New Town cemetery were no longer possible for Jews in the Old Town, and they were forced to found a new cemetery within their own settlement. This was the origin of the Old Jewish Cemetery, the first historical mention of which dates from about 1440. With the passage of time a roadway developed on the site of the first cemetery, and today no one recalls that in this busy part of modern Prague there was once a burial ground.

Making one's way along the twisted paths of the Old Cemetery, one passes a pyramid-shaped stone surmounted by a goose, beneath which lies David Gans, the famous pupil of Tycho Brahe and friend of Kepler and other scholars, a remarkable astronomer, mathematician and the first

The blessing hands carved into a gravestone, marking the last resting-place of a member of the Cohen family.



Jewish historiographer of the modern age, who in his wisdom succeeded in anticipating whole centuries of knowledge. Then on past hundreds of other graves, and one contemplates the fates of all those who have been laid to rest here through the long centuries under these leaning tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions. If one knew how to translate them one would find many an interesting note, for in those days it was the custom to praise the good characteristics of the deceased and to give a brief description of his life.

Take a look, for instance, at the simple stone from a grave dating from 1656, the inscription on which—in translation—reads as follows: 'There died in the tenth month of the year 5416, that is 1656, beloved Mr David Kacev, butcher, son of the beloved noble Mr Moses Koref Kacev. David was a benefactor at all times. He kept and supported orphans. He was a friend of learned rabbis, loved them and always overwhelmed them with presents. Every Friday he weighed his sons and daughters and donated an equivalent weight of meat to the poor and homeless. He donated a new copper candlestick to the Old School and fuel for permanent lighting the whole year round. Therefore may his soul remain among the living.'

There are hundreds and hundreds of such inscriptions to be found here. And it is not the biographical inscriptions alone that give the visitor an idea of the conditions and lives of the deceased. One just has to take a look at the symbolic animals, figures and various objects sculptured by untrained hands in the stone, and one immediately knows the age, profession and other characteristics of the deceased. Thus a scene from Paradise indicates that here lies a woman by the name of Eve, grapes denote fertility and wisdom, scissors recall a tailor, tweezers a doctor, a pestle and mortar a pharmacist, a violin a musician, a relief showing a virgin with a ring indicates the grave of a bride, and so on. The figures and objects are characteristic creations of Jewish folk art of those times, and this means that the Old Prague Jewish Cemetery is not only of historical but also of artistic interest.

Of a somewhat later date than the old cemetery itself is the Prague Jewish Burial Society, a famous fraternity with an ancient tradition, whose Hebrew title *Hevra kadisha gomlé hasadim* means 'A Sacred Fraternity carrying out Acts of Love'. It was founded in 1564 and its ceremonies for the washing, clothing, laying in the coffin, accompanying and burying of the deceased were defined in minutest detail by Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, a scholar famed for his knowledge of natural science. The regulations of the society were finally laid down in 1573 by the great rabbi Loew himself and supplemented by the various important personages who held the post of Chief Rabbi. The members of the society had to pass examinations in funeral ceremonial, they were not allowed to indulge in games or drinking, and considered their membership an honourable function entrusted to them by society. The Fraternity and its burial rites were closely linked with the Old Prague Jewish Cemetery, being transferred at a later date to the more modern Prague cemeteries, such as the one, still preserved to this day, that was founded during the plague year 1680 in the ancient Jewish settlement in Žižkov, and the large new cemetery in Strašnice, which is still used.

Formerly the Old Cemetery was an open, well-kept garden. It only acquired its present



Detail of a gravestone with carved jug, the symbol of the Lewit family, whose task it used to be to wash the hands of the priest before commencing religious service.

congested appearance in 1903, when the Burial Fraternity, which administered the cemetery, had to consent—against violent opposition—to the modernisation and reconstruction of a section of more than 1,900 square yards. The gravestones from the section that was relinquished were removed to the part of the cemetery that was left otherwise untouched and which is now covered with a confused and overcrowded mass of stones. The bones were buried on a low bank known as 'Nefele' which one comes across as one wanders through the cemetery, and on the tombstone that surmounts the bank one finds the full story of this cemetery written in Hebrew

by the senior rabbi of Prague of that time, Dr Nathan Ehrenfeld. As one continues along the narrow path towards the Pinkas Synagogue, one also comes across a Hebrew inscription which asks the pardon of the dead for the fact that they were disturbed in their eternal sleep.

One wanders between the half destroyed broken gravestones and listens to the guide who is recalling the medieval days of the Prague ghetto. Not so long ago the narrow paths leading between the hundreds of stones with illegible Hebrew inscriptions were bustling with people. There, in the centre of the cemetery, among gravestones dating from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, is a Renaissance tomb with Baroque elements, which stands out above all the others. It is the grave of the famous Prague rabbi, Loew, renowned as the creator of the Golem.

Till shortly before the Second World War, orthodox Jews who had some trouble or worry on their minds or some request which they wanted granted would make pilgrimages to this grave. They would write their wish or request on a piece of paper and throw it into the grave—and then wait. If their wish was fulfilled, they attributed it to the magical power of the great rabbi, if not, they would try again. People came here daily, as they did to the Catholic equivalent, the Church of St Tadeus in the New Town; mothers who begged for the preservation of the lives or health of their dear ones, men who had some important problem in their lives to solve, sometimes even young folk who thought that in spite of being ill-prepared, they might yet beg for good results in their coming examinations. What problems, fears, hopes and personal tragedies could one read of on the thousands of little slips of paper which have been thrown into these cracks! What fates could one find and what tragedies would one come across if one could follow the lives of their writers through Terezín, Maydanek, Auschwitz or Ravensbrueck, from whence they never returned!

The magic power of the Golem did not help them. There came modern-style Golems who, like their historic counterpart, also began to ravage and rage. In the Middle Ages it was the Great Rabbi Loew who apparently forgot to remove the magic tablet from his robot's mouth. In the case of its modern successors, it was the surrounding world which did not forget, but owing to indifference and short-sightedness, did not want to see the ruin and destruction which was being carried out by the uniformed Golems of the twentieth century.

When it finally saw, it was too late. Millions of people, mothers, old men and children, had paid with their lives for this indifference. They had become the sacrifices to a monstrous ideology, which has their cruel, inhuman deaths on its conscience. Amongst those who suffered were also people whose modest wishes and requests lie to this day within the grave of the Great Rabbi Loew. The empty paths of the Old Prague Jewish Cemetery, the most famous Jewish cemetery in the world, which has inspired so many renowned writers, poets and painters of many nations, is their only memorial. Memorial in the sense that they remind one of those that walked here not so long ago and now walk no longer...

The tomb above the grave of the famous Prague Rabbi Loew contains thousands of suppliant letters from the faithful, in the hope that they would get help from the miraculous rabbi.



The 'Swedish' Flag

In the rustle and bustle of the city traffic in the streets of Prague today, dominated as they are by the red-and-white trams, winding like gay worms along metal tracks, one easily misses the city's emblem which may be seen on the sides of these trams. It was designed in 1920 when central Prague was linked with the surrounding communities to form Greater Prague and a new emblem was required for the capital city of the newly formed Republic. It was made up of the original emblem of the city—the three towers and a rampart, with a hand wielding a sword—supplemented by the addition of the banners of the former independent towns and villages.

If one looks carefully one is surprised to find something unique in Europe. The third banner on the right is a red flag with the large yellow star of David in the centre. The presence of this flag amongst the other flags of the formerly independent communities is a symbol of common efforts and common struggles through many a long century. The Jewish star of David as part of the emblem of the city of Prague!

Yet how did the red flag with the six-pointed star become the emblem of the Prague Jewish Town? We have to go back several centuries to the year 1648, when the Swedish General, Koenigsmark, invaded Bohemia, reached Prague, and began to besiege the city. By the end of July of that year the Swedes had occupied the Little Town on the left bank, and the danger was that they would occupy the right bank of the river too. Today we cannot imagine how a fairly narrow stream like the Vltava could have halted a whole army. But in the days when a ride from one of today's suburbs to another was an adventure for a traveller, the crossing of the Vltava posed a problem for the Swedish army. The Prague garrison leader, Count Colloredo, urgently sent a messenger through the occupied area, in order to call for help from the army in Kouřím. The messenger was a Jew. The emperor's army reached Prague in time and prevented the complete encirclement of the town by the Swedes.



The emblem of the City of Prague. Among the assembled banners of the places that were united to form the city, the third from the right is the red flag with the six-pointed star representing the Prague Jewish Town.

The efforts of this messenger, however, were not the only service provided at that time by the inhabitants of the Jewish Town, which in those days, incidentally, was the one central European Jewish town of any size with a developed educational system, scholarship and printing. While Prague was being bombarded, 800 Jews participated in its defence as members of the fire service, others did guard duty on the ramparts and gates, groups of craftsmen also helped to do emergency repairs to the damaged bastions. By day 100 and at night 300 Jews were permanently on call in emergency, stationed in Rybí Náměstí (Fish Square), where they had hooks and ox-hides ready for fighting fires. In addition, the Jews had to keep day and night watch on the section of the banks of the River Vltava bordering their town, as the enemy might have tried

to ford the river there. And that they actually took part in the fighting is shown by the fact that they suffered greater losses in comparison with other parts of Prague—22 killed and 30 wounded, whereas the university students had only 13 dead, and the much, much larger army itself little more than 100. It was not until 1st November that the news came through to Prague that peace had been signed on 24th October, thus bringing the Thirty Years' War to an end. Emperor Ferdinand III rewarded the defenders of Prague in various ways. The Jews received permission to live in any of the imperial cities and royal towns, the right to participate in all trades except armoury, the Jewish Elders were relieved of the responsibility for the misdemeanours of their fellow-believers, and, as visible symbol, the Jewish Town received a large red flag with a six-pointed star and a Swedish helmet in the centre. That—at least—is one of the versions. The second, which is perhaps the one which experts in recent times have been more inclined to support, maintains that the 'helmet' in the centre of the star represents the Jewish hat, which Jews in the old days had to wear to differentiate them from the rest of the inhabitants.

The six-pointed star, which had appeared in the seal of Sidon and which, up to this time, had been used in various countries as an inn sign, a decoration for churches and so on, became a purely Jewish emblem only during the sixteenth century. It was at that time that the famous cabalist, Lurya, attributed several meanings to it, one of which was connected with the day of the week, the six days (the six points) revolving round the Sabbath (the centre of the star). In any case Prague anticipated this development. During the medieval period the original emblem of the Jews had been an eight-armed candlestick, attached to a six-pointed star. In 1354 Emperor Charles IV ordered the Jews to use a red flag with the star of David and Solomon's seal in its centre. Following the battle with the Swedes, according to the first of the two versions, to this seal was added the Swedish helmet, so that the part played by the Prague Jews in the struggle against the Swedish siege should be remembered for all time. The Great Flag, which is preserved to this day in the Old-New Synagogue in Prague, became the official banner of the Jewish Town and as such was incorporated in 1920 into the emblem of the City of Prague.

The flag was so heavy that on the occasion of coronations and other events, when it was carried in procession, it needed thirteen strong men to lift it. But the Prague Jews were very proud of it and they always managed to take it out into the streets on every important occasion in spite of difficulties. In those days the houses in the ghetto were packed tightly together, and for lack of space even the passages between them had been closed; rows of new makeshift houses sprang up above the archways, dwelling places were even built in the forecourts, and the streets were already identifiable by name. And in such surroundings it certainly was very gay at coronation time! Wine and beer flowed from the fountains and the windows of the houses were ablaze with candles, flares and fireworks; masqueraders strolled through the streets dressed to represent biblical figures, and the people of Prague for a long time used to use the phrase 'it's like a Jewish masquerade' to describe gay folk festivals.

All kinds of lively and sometimes even tragi-comic events, however, took place in connection with the flag. During coronation ceremonies, in which the custom was for it to be carried at the

The original flag with the Jewish star and the Swedish helmet in its centre, awarded to the inhabitants of the Jewish Town for their part in the struggle against the Swedes. Today it stands in its original place in the Old-New Synagogue, from where it used to be taken down only for very exceptional ceremonial occasions.



head of a procession of Jewish craftsmen, the inhabitants of the Jewish Town introduced their own special tribute: on the very tip of the banner would sit a young man whose task it was to laud the glory of the new ruler without cease. It was neither an easy nor a very thankful task and the tip on the wavering banner was always fraught with a certain danger. Hence it was not always easy to find a volunteer. Sometimes someone was tempted by the romance of it and the fact that throughout the ceremony he would be a centre of attraction; at other times a young man would wish to show off his courage in front of his chosen girl. But in spite of all this, there was often no one willing to risk his neck, and the Jewish Elders—who were sticklers for tradition—were faced with the task of finding someone in exchange for a suitable offer.

Once they were still not successful, though they had offered to pay a large sum of money. There was no volunteer, even for the largest sum the Town could afford. It had almost come

to the point where they would have to forgo tradition, when suddenly someone thought of a good idea: 'We can't find anyone in Prague, but suppose we get a Jew from the country and promise him the rights of a Prague citizen?' The idea was a last resort and was therefore accepted unanimously. On the Friday evening the offer was announced in all the synagogues in Bohemia, and then the Elders waited.

At that time, in a small town not far from Prague, there lived a Jewish butcher's assistant, who was very much in love with a Prague Jewess. This beauty, the ideal of all the young lads in the Jewish Town, would have lost her right to Prague citizenship if she had married a country Jew and would have had to leave her home town on getting married. This she didn't want to do on any account. The young butcher's assistant was beside himself because of her obstinacy and, since the threat of suicide did not help to soften the young lady's heart, he slowly began to give up all hope.

Then he heard of this offer by the Elders of the Prague Jewish Town. He did not hesitate an instant and set out for Prague, where he offered his services. Naturally he was received with great joy, and less than a week later he hopped on to the high stave of the banner, praising aloud the glory of the ruler, of whom, needless to say, he was not thinking. In his mind's eye he had only the picture of the girl he had chosen, to whom he could now go as a proud citizen of Prague and ask for her hand in marriage. The ride was successful, but when the butcher's assistant came forward triumphantly to ask for the hand of his chosen one, the coquettish young lady found some other excuse for refusing him.

Today the 'Swedish' banner rests in the Old-New Synagogue, where it is shown to visitors as a silent testimony to times long past, as a testimony to the heroism and, later, to the ceremonial rejoicings of the inhabitants of the old ghetto. Together with the Jewish banner with the six-pointed star in the Prague emblem, the Jewish Town banner itself remains a unique European, and probably also a world curiosity.

The Gate to the World

Right close to the former Jewish Quarter, in a place where even a native of Prague would be in two minds as to whether it was within the Old or the New Town, is the building of the first Central European University, founded in the fourteenth century by Emperor Charles IV. This wise ruler, known to this day among the people as 'the father of our country', is recalled with gratitude by the Prague Jews. For it was he who protected them in 1349 from the great pogrom of that year, which claimed so many victims in neighbouring Germany.

At that time the Prague Synod resolved that Jewish men should differentiate themselves from the other inhabitants by the wearing of a hat with a broad brim and the women by wearing their hair combed up over their foreheads. The church Synod also forbade the building of new synagogues and the decoration of the old ones. In those days the population of the flourishing metropolis of Bohemia lived comparatively well. But the Jews, in contrast to the other citizens, lived in low gloomy houses, behind whose barred windows the Sabbath candles flickered in such a way that their flames would not be visible in the Christian quarters if it could be avoided. Nevertheless the lights on Friday evenings and the candles of the Hanukkah Festival (in late December) gave rise to many superstitions, for it was at a period long before Christian households made a habit of lighting up their trees at Christmas time.

It was at this time, too, that the plague was being brought to the Middle East by the caravans from China, and from there spread to the Italian ports and then throughout the whole of Europe. In 1349 it ravaged the Bohemian countryside, passing on to northern and eastern Europe, where two years later it disappeared just as suddenly as it had arrived. Those were bad times. Three days following the appearance of the lump, the invalid would die, with no hope of help or remedy. The superstitious saw it as a punishment from God, who could only be appeased by godly acts. And they considered the murdering of Jews to be such godly acts.

Charles IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, realised, however, that the black plague could not be chased away by the murdering of innocent people. So he issued a writ by which he took the Jews into his protection by making them the servants of his household, thus frustrating the intentions of those who attacked them. Thanks to this action the critical year passed in Prague without the anti-semitic storms which shook neighbouring Germany.

This episode, however, was not the only thing that linked the inhabitants of the Jewish Town with the Bohemian ruler, who was the first to lay the foundations for the planned construction of Prague, who founded the first Central European university in Bohemia, had a stone bridge built across the Vltava, had vineyards raised in the countryside modelled on those in France, and altogether did many other good and useful things for his subjects. In particular, Prague University—the Carolinum, which bears his name to this day—was from its very start closely connected with the Jewish section of the population.

Charles IV had a Jewish treasurer named Lazar, who owned a house by the Jewish Town Gate near the Church of St Nicolas in Golden Lane in the Old Town, and this house became the first home of the new university. The Charles University remained in this house until it moved to the New Market Place, and even then it kept on good neighbourly terms with the Jewish Town, which was quite close by. The professors of the university were mostly priests, the chancellor was the archbishop of Prague, and the school professed Christianity.

Following the Battle of the White Mountain, when the university was handed over to the Jesuits, the teaching staff had to take an oath of allegiance to the Catholic faith, and therefore Jews did not consider the fact that they could not participate in the university life to be discrimination. They had their own Talmud school in Prague, which was considered to be the Jewish University and its director was known as the rector of the Prague Talmud University.

The good relations which existed between the Jewish Town and the University not only found expression in mutual help in the event of fire, a frequent disaster in those days, but also in the assistance the Medical Faculty gave to the Jewish Town, and it was the University that censored Jewish books imported from abroad. Once, in 1644, when a certain student had wronged a Jew, the Rector was entrusted with the task of pillorying the act in his Sunday sermon and of warning against its repetition. Not only that: Prague's Charles University was one of the first to admit Jewish students and granted doctors' degrees to Jews long before most others followed its example.

Jews were always known as good doctors and they were frequently appointed court doctors to European royal courts, to the Pope, and even to the court of the Sultan. Such doctors had usually graduated at Padua University, from whence from the end of the sixteenth century onwards they travelled all over the world. If they wished to practise as doctors in Prague they had to have their degrees recognised by the university there. But as from 1774 Prague University itself examined Jews if they wished to settle in the ghetto as doctors and from that time

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Part of the historic building of the Charles University in Prague, the first central European university to admit Jewish students.



on, Christian and Jewish students studied the science of medicine harmoniously side by side until the coming of the Nazis, who expelled all Jewish students from the universities and later even closed down all Czech high schools. Even under the anti-semitic rule of the Hapsburg empress, Maria Theresa, Jewish and Christian students were allowed to go on studying side by side, the Jewish students leaving their hats on their heads till the moment the professors arrived. Under Emperor Joseph II all the other faculties of Charles University were opened to Jews.

On 23rd January 1788, there came the solemn moment when Beer Joss became the first Prague Jewish student to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Medical Science in the University Hall. This was celebrated as a holiday throughout the entire ghetto. The new doctor, the first Prague Jewish citizen to be awarded a degree in his home university, settled in Golden Lane, and from that time on, the number of Prague-born doctors grew and their fame spread quickly beyond the bounds of the ghetto and to foreign lands. Dr Barbier Lazebník lived in a small one-floor cottage in the Street of the Three Fountains; in an unnamed alley lived the learned doctor of medicine of the Prague ghetto, Dr Jonáš Jeiteles, who was soon rich enough to own an apartment on the ground and first floors, with two bay windows, and to set up a consulting room that was remarkably well equipped for those days. Just opposite lived a surgeon who—like Dr Jeiteles—was often called upon to visit patients beyond the bastions of the ghetto in the not so distant Christian quarter, where he was known as a philanthropist and an excellent specialist and much sought after. It was only shortly after this that Dr W. Wessely was made a full Jewish professor of Charles University, having been the first Jew to graduate as a doctor of philosophy. Since then many Jewish names have graced the list of lecturers and professors at this celebrated ancient university.

In 1948 Charles University celebrated its 600th anniversary and famous scientists and scholars travelled to Prague from all over the world to the ceremony. During the 600 years of its existence, thousands of young people in all the various fields of human activity had spread the fame of their renowned university, the first to be built in Central Europe. Among those students there had been many Jews, the followers of Dr Beer, Wessely and all those who were allowed to study in Prague in times when the majority of the other universities in Europe refused to accept them.

It is almost symbolic that today, as we leave the streets of the former Prague ghetto, we pass the buildings of the Charles University on our way to the other parts of the town. It was indeed the Charles University which opened the gates of science to the Jews of Prague.

Pogrom

It was the year 1389. April weather was still uncertain, with snowy slush and rain showers alternating with bright sunshine. But the vigorous spring air was already blowing through Prague, celebrating its arrival in even the narrowest alleys of the Jewish Town. There was a joyous atmosphere there, what with the coming of the most beautiful days in the year and the fact that the Feast of the Passover was already imminent. Wherever one looked people were cleaning windows, and the demand for water for scrubbing was so great that the streets were full of male and female water-carriers carting tubs of water about and busily engaged in friendly conversation. Everyone was busy. Men were returning from the fish market, women were loaded down with groceries, young girls were hurrying to the bakers for matzos and the butchers' boys were delivering meat in large open baskets carried on their heads.

The days prior to the Feast of the Passover lent the Jewish Town a special character. Double-teamed carts, on which the country folk had brought in provisions which they were selling specially for this Feast, wound their way through the noisy, busy crowds, flower girls displayed their wares in Pinkas and Broad Street, and the gloomy face of the ghetto was suddenly transformed into a smiling, friendly countenance. So it was that fateful April of the year 1389.

The Feast was now almost over. In the home of Solomon Markus, the mother, with the help of her two young daughters, was preparing the table for the eighth and last of the feast days, and her little six-year-old son, David, was dancing with delight around his father, who had just returned home; none of them dreamt that at that very moment, in a nearby Jewish street, an incident had occurred which was to ruin the idyll of their family supper.

At that moment a priest was walking down the street carrying the last sacrament to a dying man. Suddenly a handful of sand and dirt was thrown at him by some ragamuffin or other. Bystanders, happening to witness the scene, saw in it a chance to spread an interesting piece

of news, and that very evening an exaggerated and distorted story of the affront done to a Catholic priest spread throughout the town of Prague.

The news spread like lightning. Every now and then someone added a bit to make it more effective. The indignation of the population was gleefully seized upon by the mob, who saw a possibility of being witness to and participant in an event which would relieve the dull monotony of ordinary everyday life. Groups began to form in the streets, while young and old boasted that they had witnessed the insult done to the priest and told horrifying tales which served to incense the crowd. Larger and larger crowds began to gather near the ramparts surrounding the Jewish Town, and they only waited for the spark to be thrown which would set light to this now uncontrollable situation.

They did not have long to wait. A short cry of 'Let's go for 'em' interrupted the monotonous hum of the mob and the whole human mass led by some tough young lads hurled itself past the Church of the Holy Spirit, through the gate into Broad Street. At that moment Solomon Markus interrupted the family supper. The ominous roar which was growing louder and louder induced the father of the family to look out of the window. At first he only heard the shouting from the neighbouring streets, then suddenly the crowd poured into Šmiles Lane and he witnessed the first acts of violence.

'Don't worry, we've done nothing, so we've nothing to fear!' he assured his family, trying at the same time to reassure himself. 'Lock the door and block up the entrance with the cupboard!' He himself pulled down the blinds and watched what was going on through a tiny crack.

Meanwhile the crowd was running amok. The news of what was happening in the Jewish Town had spread to the New Town and more and more rioters poured through all six gates. Meanwhile the gate at St Valentine's had given way, the fort at Narrow Alley had been sawn down, and to the brutal laughter of the marauders the first groups were penetrating the dwelling houses. In the confusion, Jews jumped over the walls of courtyards and sought salvation in flight. The old and the infirm, unable to get away, begged for mercy on bended knees. 'Throw 'em down!' yelled the crowd from below, when they saw that several of the more daring had penetrated up to the first floors of the houses. It was in Šmiles Lane itself, in the house where, a few moments previously, the family of Solomon Markus had been seated peacefully at supper. Neither the locked door nor the artificial barrier of a heavy oak cupboard had been of any avail. With the aid of some old beams several of the rioters entered the room and in an instant they had hold of the little weeping David. When they heard the shout 'Throw 'em down' they hurled the child out of the window. After him came David's little sister, defending herself valiantly and biting everyone who came near. But outside they were waiting for her and spiked her with their lances. The father, trying to defend his children, was killed on the spot, the mother fainted and was trampled under foot.

The mob raged and plundered in other houses in the same way. Nursing mothers fled with their babies to the Old-New Synagogue, where they hoped the attackers would perhaps not dare to cross the threshold. But why should people who are not averse to murdering innocent old



Today, as on the day of the great Prague pogrom and for many centuries previously, Jews recall the exodus from Egypt when, at the time of the eight days of the Feast of the Passover, they eat unleavened bread instead of bread and pastry.

men, children and invalids, be afraid of entering God's house? With great shouts they heaved the massive iron gates open and entered the synagogue. There they began to kill the women and children. The pallid poet, Avigdor Karo, who till then had been trying to rally those present, was suddenly silent, for blood was being shed in the sanctuary.

At that moment a priest from the Bohemian College approached the Jewish Town through a gate at the end of a side street and tried with arguments and threats to draw off the crowd.

Seeing they took no notice of him, he ran off and brought back a copper pot full of water. In a few moments he had gathered a group of Jews about him, who sought his protection. 'Which of you will become a Christian?' he shouted, to interrupt the uproar going on around him. 'We, here,' answered some of the desperate ones and the priest hurriedly poured water over their heads, cupping it in his hands. 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost' he repeated without pause. To the incensed mob he indicated that they should stop murdering people who had embraced the Christian faith. They did in fact retreat, but only to hurl themselves with redoubled fervour on those Jews who had refused to be christened in spite of imminent danger of death and who were prepared to die as martyrs rather than betray the faith of their fathers.

While the priest led the newly baptised to safety, apologising to them that he had been forced to act in this way to save their lives, the mob burst into the Jewish Cemetery. They began to destroy tombstones, to seize bodies from the graves, to level the graves to the ground, and to scatter bones all over the cemetery. Then they returned to the narrow alleyways, which were beginning to fill with the smell of burning. Finally, laden with bundles of stolen goods, the marauders ran back to safety through the gates which they had entered some hours previously.

A cloud of black smoke now veiled the sky, which only a short while ago had arched its clear spring blue above the holiday atmosphere of the Prague Jewish Town. Nearly all those who had sat down so joyously to their suppers at the end of a day differing in no way from all the other days of the festival, had been murdered in those few hours. Over 4,000 corpses, old people, children, pregnant women, invalids and others lay in pools of blood out in the streets, in their dwellings and in the synagogues, and amongst these were the mutilated bodies of the infants.

Thus ended 18th April 1389, which had begun with the joyful entry of spring into the Prague ghetto. It was a most terrible pogrom, which was to be repeated—though on a much larger scale—a full 550 years later. The gas chambers of the last war are today recalled in the inscriptions on the gravestones of the Prague Jewish Cemetery, but the pogrom of 1389 also has its memorial. It is the prayer-book of the poet, Avigdor Karo, an eye-witness to the massacre of that year, and it is read to this day in the Prague synagogues. 'Even the graves were raked up,' writes Karo in his elegy. 'The bones of our long-deceased forefathers were torn from their place of everlasting rest, the gravestones were destroyed and the graves levelled to the ground...'

For years after this terrible pogrom the people that remained in Prague Jewish Town lived in poverty and misery. The only ones to escape were those who had happened to be out of Prague at the time or at least outside the Jewish Town and, in addition, there were a few dozen who had managed to sham death during the massacre, or at least to appear severely wounded. Many of those who had saved their lives by accepting the Christian faith, by agreement with the authorities in the Bohemian College, were allowed to return to their original religion. But all were broken in spirit, for each had witnessed the violent deaths of their nearest and dearest, and very few found that others of their own families returned with them.

Golems

There are few tales that have enjoyed such world-wide popularity as the story of Chief Rabbi Loew's robot, the Golem. Meyrink's novel, which in its time was one of the most widely read books by this German author, the famous French film of the same name, the famous reportage by E. E. Kisch, and dozens of other works by writers and journalists who have visited Prague, all drew their subject material from the second half of the sixteenth century, when Prague and, within it, the Jewish Town were flourishing in the great days of Emperor Rudolph II.

It was then that a schoolmaster, the Moravian regional rabbi, Loew, came to Prague, where he had been called to take up the post of teacher of religion in the Jewish Town. He proceeded to teach in the famous Klaus Synagogue and lived in a small simple house in Broad Street, where at a later date stood house number 911 and above whose door was the lion which we today find over the rabbi's grave. He became Chief Rabbi of Prague at the age of eighty and his fame spread far beyond the borders of Prague and Bohemia. He was a wise man who won respect, above all, because he preached a simple morality. As an outstanding Hebrew scholar, the author of bible commentaries and religious tracts, he even won renown among Christian scholars. He died in 1609 at the age of 104, and was buried with great solemnity in the presence of the high functionaries of that time in the Old Jewish Cemetery, where his grave is visited to this day by foreign visitors who come to Prague. A monument to him carved by a famous Czech sculptor decorates the Prague Town Hall.

Linked to the tale about the creature created by Chief Rabbi Loew is the centuries old Jewish tradition of a being who would protect them in times of trouble. This being was given the name 'Golem', it was said to have the superhuman strength of a robot and to intervene whenever some wrong or other had been done to the Jews. As these wrongs piled up over the centuries in great numbers, it is not surprising that there is no lack of variety in the tales.

Rabbi Loew apparently created the Golem of clay, and by placing a 'shem' or tablet with a magic inscription in its mouth he could bring it to life with superhuman strength and great mental powers. On Friday evenings, before commencing the evening service in honour of the approaching Sabbath, the tablet had to be removed, at which moment the Golem would fall lifeless to the ground, and was only brought back to life on Sunday morning when the tablet was once again replaced in its mouth. 'Golem arise!' his creator would say and the clay figure, answering with the words 'What do you want of me, master?' would do as it was bid. Thus the whole week long it would do as its master desired, until the Saturday came again.

One Friday evening, however, the absent-minded rabbi went to the Old-New Synagogue and forgot his regular weekly task. The Golem remained calm until the moment when the believers in the synagogue began to intone Psalm 92 which marked the beginning of the service. At that moment it broke loose. It smashed everything it could lay its hands on, and what it could not break it flung out of the window. A large crowd soon collected, joyfully welcoming each new piece of clothing or furniture that was thrown out and carrying them off to their homes, thinking that perhaps the rabbi was house cleaning and throwing away all the things he no longer needed.

Then the rabbi suddenly remembered that in his hurry he had forgotten to remove the tablet. Breathlessly he ran home and, after a short struggle, succeeded in removing the magic inscription from the mouth of the maddened robot, upon which the Golem fell to the ground like a log. The unsuspecting believers in the synagogue were later somewhat amazed when the rabbi returned to find that he began to sing Psalm 92 again. Since then to this day on Friday evening in the Old-New Synagogue this Psalm is always sung twice over.

Another version of the tale relates that one Friday evening the chief rabbi was delayed at his sick daughter's bedside, and the congregation began praying without him. As soon as they began the service with Psalm 92, the Golem ran into the synagogue, caught hold of the pillars and shook the whole building, threw out the prayer books, benches and lamps. The startled congregation ran for the rabbi, who on entering the House of Prayer shouted: 'Stop praying!' In that instant the Golem ceased to rage and the rabbi removed the magic formula from its mouth. So that there should be no repetition of the affair, on the following Sunday morning they carried the Golem up into the loft of the Old-New Synagogue, where it lies to this day—according to the legend.

That is the best known of the stories about the Golem. Another, less known to the public at large, relates that the Golem once revealed the real culprit when a murder was wrongly blamed on the Jews. Next to the synagogue there was a Jewish tanner's shop, which employed a deaf-and-dumb Christian servant from the village of Zlíchov. One day this servant suddenly fell sick with pneumonia, died, and was buried in Zlíchov Cemetery. His brothers, however, tried to use his death to stir up anti-Jewish feeling. At nightfall they removed the body from the grave and secretly carried it to the Jewish Town. Then they produced witnesses. Naturally suspicion of

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Detail of the Great Rabbi Loew's gravestone, with the lion symbolizing his name.



murder fell upon the inhabitants of the ghetto, who could not explain how the corpse came to be there and understandably enough could not prove their innocence. But then the Golem, blessed with its special powers, took a hand in it all. It went off to Zlíchov and, during the night, found the report of the death following illness in the register, whereupon it also found the open grave. Thus it revealed the base action of the culprits, who were duly handed over to the worldly arm of the law.

There have been many such tales about the Golem. In all of them it intervened where injustice had been done to Jews, so that in time it came to be looked on as the fabulous defender of the Prague Jews, a sort of abstract concept with whose intervention they consoled themselves when they were wronged. The Golem was not created by Rabbi Loew but by the imagination of the Jewish outcasts. During the time of the Counter Reformation the Jesuits tried to convert Jews to Catholicism. When they failed, they incited the mob against them, and they were still forced to live behind the high walls of the ghetto. The climax of these incitements was their invention of the idea of the 'ritual murder', which proved to be very popular with the masses. Wherever such an idea gained ground the Jews were sure of neither their lives nor their property. So in their minds they created a fabulous belief in a magical being which would one day relieve them of their hardships. Such a being was the Golem.

When the famous Prague journalist and writer, E. E. Kisch, began to write about the Golem, he traced his way to the loft of the Old-New Synagogue. He climbed the outside steps of the building to the loft where, apart from centuries of dust, he naturally found nothing but old and tattered prayer books.

Today the superstition about help coming from this oft eulogised artificial being, which served as the subject for so many dramas and film stories, is a thing of the past. The guides accompanying visitors through the Old Jewish Cemetery, however, keep alive the legend of the Golem as they stand before the grave of Chief Rabbi Loew. Indeed it was the Golem which was perhaps equally responsible for the fame of the Prague Chief Rabbi of that time and of the whole Prague ghetto itself.

The statue of Rabbi Loew on the new Prague Town Hall, a symbol of the equality of all the citizens of the Czechoslovak capital, regardless of religious conviction.



Maisl Street

The broad asphalted avenues and paved streets, the five-storey patrician apartment houses, the fine-looking shop windows of the modern stores of the Prague Old Town, none of this is at all indicative of the fact that prior to the draining and raising of the level of the area it was simply a mass of narrow, crooked alleyways with low houses, whose foundations only were of stone and which otherwise were made of wood.

What differentiates this part of Prague from the other sections of the city is the complete lack of green spaces or children's playgrounds. It is only right beside the Old-New Synagogue itself that there is a tiny patch of green grass and a few trees, providing an oasis of quiet amid the bustle of the metropolis. Thus one needs abundant imagination to take oneself back several hundreds of years and to picture the ghetto as it was in the Middle Ages.

The word 'ghetto' came to be used fairly late in its history. Up to the sixteenth century when speaking of this part of Prague one would still speak of the Jewish Town. It is only from then on that the term *gieto nuovo* began to be used, coming from Venice where in 1516 the Jews were forced to make their homes in the new settlement beside the Gietto Piazza, where cannons were cast. Then slowly the Polish *Żydowske* streets, the Spanish *Judería*, the French *Juiverie* and Jewish quarters and alleyways all over the world came to acquire the common name of 'ghetto'. And Prague was not an exception. It was, of course, only an external change and had nothing to do with the Town's internal life.

Today this period is only recalled by the names of the last three remaining streets: Joachim Street, with the building of the former Jewish School which still bears an inscription in Hebrew

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The most well-known view of what remains of the former Prague ghetto: the Old-New Synagogue and the Jewish Town Hall in Maisl Street.



over the entrance; Joseph Street, a reminder of the time when the Jewish Town was renamed the Joseph Quarter; and Maisl Street. Joseph Street, today a side street, was once the main avenue of the Jewish Town in which the characteristic commercial life of the ghetto functioned in an almost oriental fashion. It was also graced by the most handsome houses, for it was here that the most outstanding citizens of the community had their abode. Apart from the members of the Council of the Elders, there were doctors and rabbis. And in those days there was a plethora of the latter in the Jewish Town. For the Talmud forbade the Jews to trade in coins and to take high rates of interest, just as this was forbidden to the Christians by the Holy Synod. The exceptions to this rule were the men who devoted themselves entirely to the study of letters and could therefore not earn a livelihood in any other way, namely the rabbis. Thus nearly every house in what is today Joseph Street, which at that time was known as Rabbi Street, housed at least one member of the rabbinical brethren.

The main street of the ghetto crossed almost at its centre the third and last street which recalls the former Jewish Town, namely Maisl Street. If one were to ask the natives of Prague today the origin of the name of this street, there would be few who could give the correct answer. And yet the street commemorates a fascinating personality, who lived in an extremely interesting period in the history of the Prague ghetto and who was largely responsible for the great improvements done to his birthplace. His name was Mordechai Maisl, a mayor of the Jewish Town.

It was at the end of the sixteenth century, at the time when Emperor Rudolf II, fearing an attack by the Turks, betook himself to Prague Castle and summoned artists and scientists from all over the world to his court. Prague thus became the temporary and in many cases the permanent home of the outstanding personalities of that time. The Jewish Town was again no exception to this. It was the time of the famous Rabbi Loew, the astronomer and chronicler, David Gans, the time when Jewish artists, especially the goldbeaters, were accepted as members of the Guild of Artists. The Jewish Town was administered by Mayor Maisl, son of an old Prague family, who as a youth had learnt the hardships of poverty and suffering. He was born in 1528 and as a twelve-year-old boy had lived through the first and, fifteen years later, the second banishment of the Jews from Prague. These events had only served to increase his love for his home town, to which he later devoted all his energies and all his financial means.

When, thanks to diligence and unusual ability, Mordechai Maisl had worked his way to a leading position in public life, when once he was elected mayor and had acquired a considerable fortune, he had the whole Jewish Town paved at his own expense, he founded a hospital, gave financial support to the Funeral Brethren, and on his own land at the corner of the Old Cemetery built a house in which he founded the Talmud High School, generally known as the Talmud University. He lent money to the propertyless without interest, on the eve of feast days he would hand out festive provisions to the poor, and each year he presented two brides from the ghetto

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Entrance to the old Prague Jewish Town Hall.


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with dowries and provided clothes for poor citizens. He also had baths built in connection with the hospital, and when the ghetto Town Hall was burned down and the Jewish community bought the building to the right of it, he turned to the reconstruction of the whole Town Hall block, starting with the building of the High Synagogue as a sort of Town Hall chapel. For this purpose he called on the services of the Italian architect, Panacia Rodero, who was assisted in the work by Prague masons; these were responsible for the native character of the interior vaulted spaces.

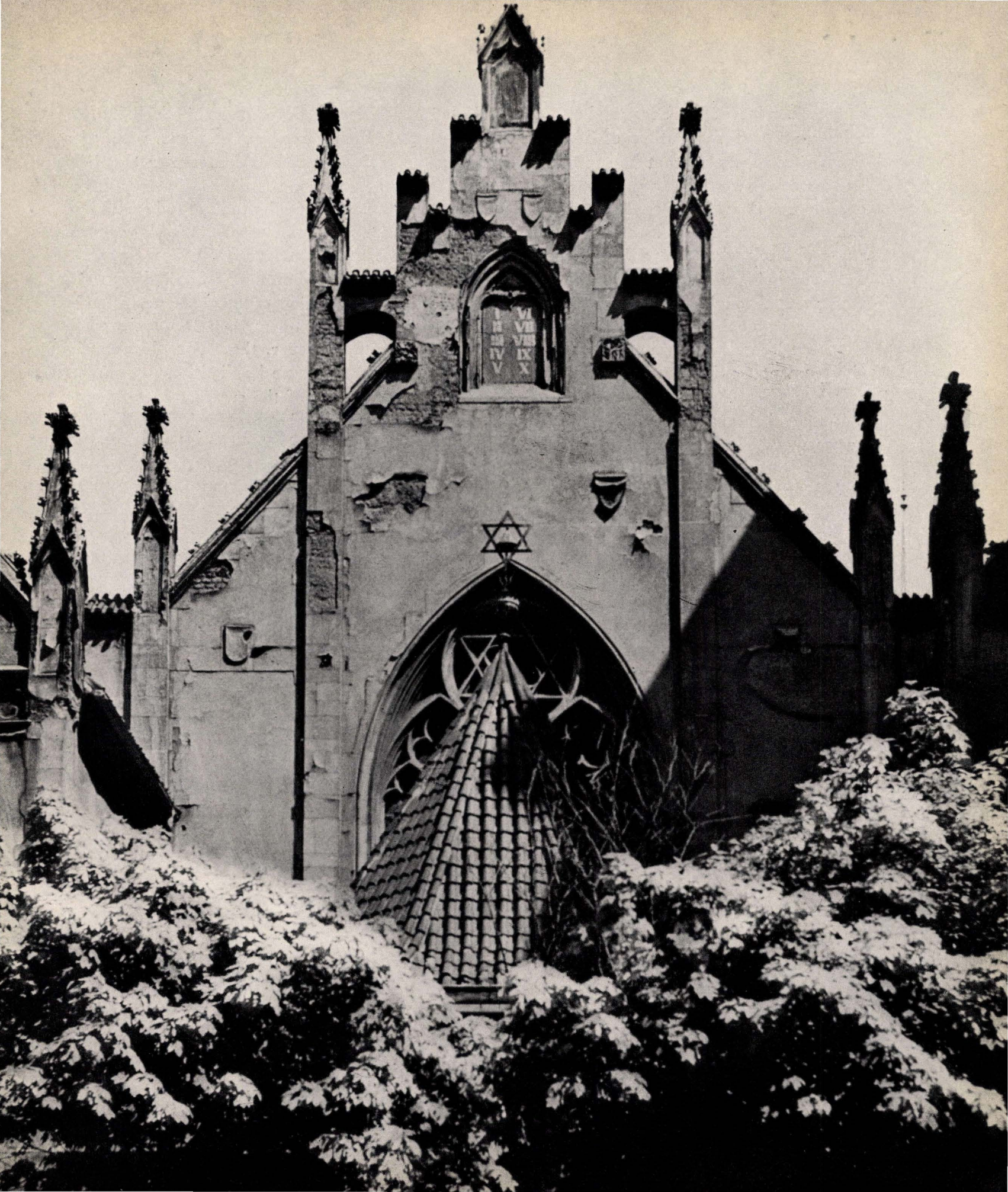
The Prague Jewish Town Hall is a curiosity of the Diaspora. There is no other example outside Israel of Jews having their own Town Hall and Mayor. This was where the Council of Elders held meetings, here they administered all the affairs of the ghetto, all quarrels and disagreements had to be settled here, both sides being heard and the judgement being given by the Elders. Later, in 1689, the Jewish community was given the right to build a tower to their Town Hall and a belfry whose chimes could be heard throughout the ghetto. This, in fact, was done and the high tower could be seen from afar, a symbol of the independence of the Jewish Town. In addition to bells and the usual tower clock, it had something that was unique in Europe and probably throughout the world in those days, namely a clock with Hebrew lettering that ran in the reverse direction. By a decree of 23rd April 1763, the Supreme Government Authorities proclaimed that the Jewish Elders deserved the greatest praise for having graced the city with such a fine tower.

But let us turn back to the time, following the fire, when Mayor Maisl had the Town Hall rebuilt, which later became—and to this day has remained—the centre of Prague Jewry. At that time—and it was the time when the ghetto was most flourishing—Prague not only acquired the external symbols of Jewish sovereignty, but it was the first town in Central Europe, for instance, to own a Hebrew printing press, some of whose publications date back to as early as 1512 and 1514. And in 1526 the printing press belonging to the famous Gerson family printed the first Hagada, the prayer book of the Feast of the Passover with pictures, which for centuries served as the authority for further efforts of this kind in the rest of the world. One of its first publications is today the property of the Oxford University Library. This printing press spread the fame of the Prague art of printing throughout the world. And there are several instances of such pioneering efforts in various fields having been made in Prague, for the favourable conditions of that time made it possible for the Prague Jews to develop culturally as well as economically.

Much of the responsibility for the improvement of the ghetto must be attributed to its mayor, who as an influential financier was really the first Jew to have connections with both the royal imperial court and with the Bohemian aristocracy. As part of the rebuilding of a fitting centre for the Jewish Town he decided to build a synagogue—which today bears his name—between Gold Street, Broad Street and Three Wells Place. Since that time there has, perhaps, never been

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The Maisl Synagogue, now part of the State Jewish Museum, hides under the shade of age-old trees, but is closely encompassed by modern blocks of flats.



such a devotee of the Prague ghetto as Mordechai Maisl, for he devoted his whole life to the rebuilding and renovating of his home town. He combined religious fervour with great organising ability, so that he succeeded in finding the golden mean between eastern mysticism and practical western ways. Just as Prague to this day bears traces of the meritorious efforts of Emperor Charles IV, so the old parts of Prague, where the former ghetto used to be, still bear the mark of Mordechai Maisl. One cannot help but admire the grandeur of his work when one stops to think what the paving of the whole Jewish Town must have meant in those days.

Mordechai Maisl, who died on the night of 14th March, 1601, thus built himself an indestructible monument through all these activities. And his ceremonial procession to the grave was attended not only by all the inhabitants of the ghetto, but also by the highest court officials, for even the Emperor himself was represented. It is interesting to note, however, that later, the Austrian Government would not recognise his last will and testament because he died leaving no close relatives. His whole fortune was therefore confiscated in favour of the crown.

Today this great town planner and lover of the Prague ghetto, Mordechai Maisl, is commemorated not only by his Renaissance tomb in the Old Jewish Cemetery, but also by the name of the synagogue which now houses one of the departments of the State Jewish Museum and the name of the street which winds through the heart of this quarter, linking the Old-New Synagogue and the Jewish Town Hall with the Prague City Town Hall in the Old Town Square. That a street of the city still bears his name is perhaps the best proof not only that Prague Jews never ceased to esteem the man who was responsible to such a degree for the rebuilding of the medieval ghetto, but also that the administration of the city of Prague itself recognised his services, when they left the street its old historic name.

The Fateful Proclamation

It was the year 1744. A cool autumn indicated to the natives of Prague that they could expect a cold, severe winter. The besieged capital of Bohemia was going through a crisis, and then early on the morning of 14th September the news spread through the town that General Harsch, commander of the Emperor's forces in Prague, had offered to capitulate to the Prussians. It was just after the Saturday when the Jews had been due to send 2,000 men to carry out essential repairs to the damaged ramparts. In order not to violate the sanctity of the Sabbath, they had procured substitutes to take their places that day. This occurrence would have passed unnoticed if it had not been for the offer of surrender.

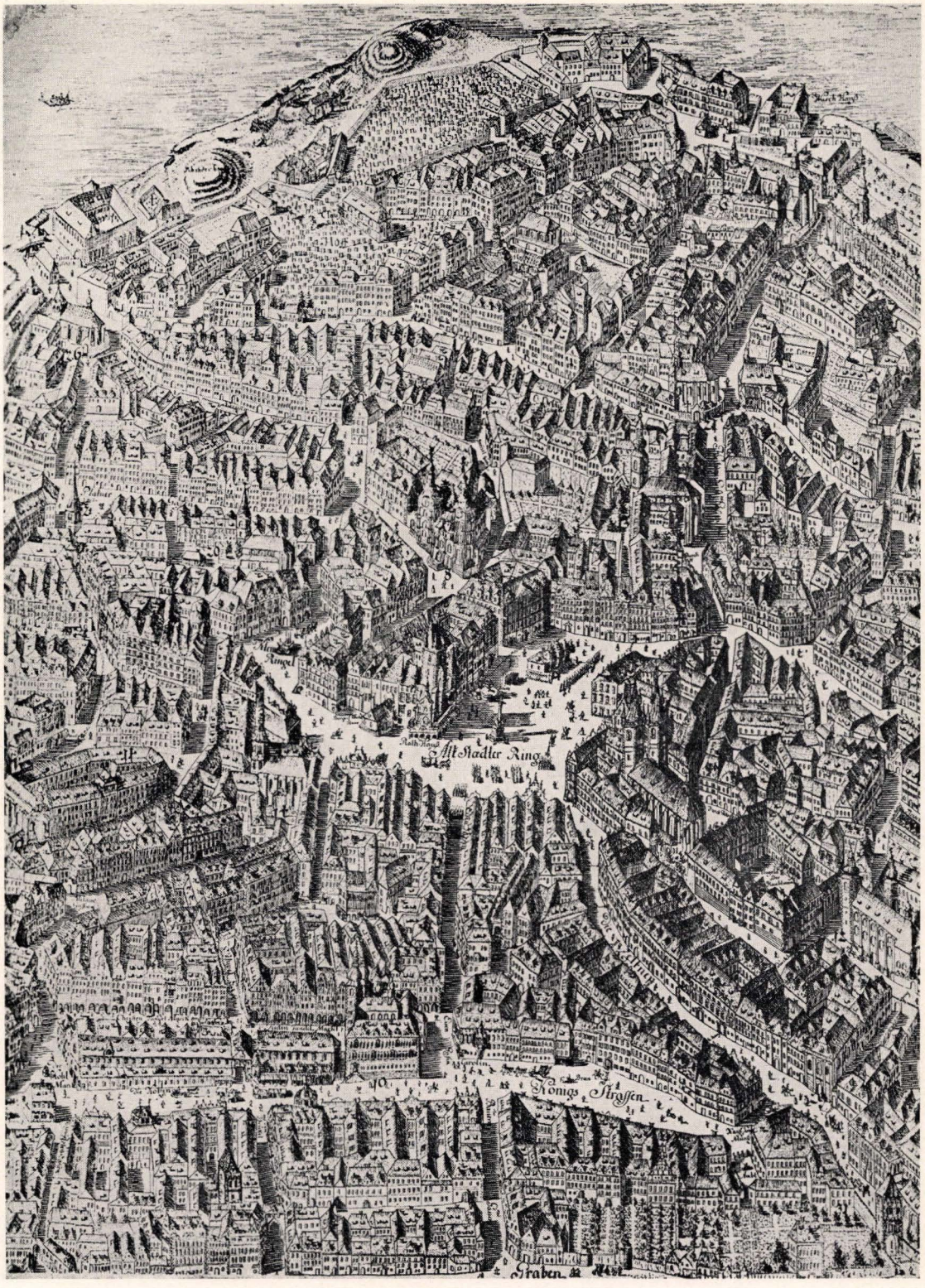
That, of course, changed everything. The people of Prague were afraid of the Prussians and therefore sought someone whom they could blame for their misfortune. Who else should they choose but the Jews, for—as the rumour went—they had obviously refused to work on the damaged fortifications in order to help the enemy. But that was not enough. The conditions of surrender safeguarded the privileges of the aristocracy, the clergy, the royal administrators, the Estates, the university and, at the request of the Austrian negotiator, the position of the Jewish Town. 'The Prussian king is protecting them for their treachery,' argued the people of Prague, taking no account of the fact that the same privileges also applied equally to the other Prague craftsmen, the students, the clergy and so on. And still that was not enough. Circumstances gave the mob yet another argument. When war reparation payments were awarded against Prague, the Jews were required to pay a contribution of 40,000 guilders, and in addition a further 20,000 from the income of the office of the Jewish Elders. The members of the Council of Elders pointed out that their function, however, was an honorary one, that they received no pay, upon which the Prussian general let them off the 20,000 guilders. 'You see how he favours them?' repeated the people of Prague. 'First they bribe him and then he lets them off.'

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that sooner or later the Jews had to be punished for their 'crimes'. The occasion arose on 26th November of that year, when the Prussians were once again forced to abandon Prague. Hardly had they passed beyond the Poříč Gate, when the crowd poured into the Jewish Town and began to plunder and destroy. For two days and nights the devil was let loose in the ghetto and the Jews were left to bear the punishment for their 'sins'. Hardly had the mob calmed down, however, when they received an even crueller blow. Three days before Christmas, posters were nailed up all over Prague in front of which the curious collected in huge crowds.

The proclamation was signed by the Empress Marie Theresa, notorious for her bitter hatred of the Jews. 'Owing to very serious reasons, We have come to the conclusion,' proclaimed the notice, 'that We shall no longer suffer Jews to live within the Bohemian kingdom. All Jews must leave Prague by 31st January 1745, and the territory of Bohemia by the end of June of the same year.' Only traders were allowed to remain within the neighbourhood of Prague till the end of June, so that they could travel to Prague daily and liquidate their businesses. None of them were to be allowed to remain in Prague overnight and by July 1745 they must not be found anywhere within the Kingdom of Bohemia. It meant that, for the first time since their original arrival in Bohemia, the Jews were being forced to abandon their settlement and to become outcasts in unknown foreign lands.

At that time, in the 330 buildings of the Jewish Town, there lived a regular population of 14,000 inhabitants, over 1,500 servants, about 800 students and several dozen visitors from country towns. Nobody believed the news when it first spread through the ghetto. But more and more eye-witnesses arriving from neighbouring areas confirmed its accuracy and by the evening there was no doubt left. Unless something unexpected happened, the whole Prague Jewish Town was to be forcibly cleared. At a special meeting that very evening, the Council of Elders decided to carry a written Appeal for Reconsideration to their cruel sovereign. 'The expulsion of so many thousands of elderly, feeble, blind and deaf people, so many people injured and broken by shocks and blows received during the recent attacks, so many pregnant and nursing mothers and young children, their expulsion in the midst of the intense frosts of this unusually cold winter means submitting them to the danger of almost certain death' ran the request, which begged for at least a postponement of the time limit. The Prague Provincial Governors themselves added the warning to the Empress that the carrying out of the order would mean that not only would the thousands of Prague Jews be subjected to the danger of probable death and attack by robbers, but that, owing to their significance in the internal and foreign trade of the country, their expulsion would result in grave danger to the development of the as yet struggling industry of Bohemia. The Governors finally cited the order of His Majesty, King Václav II, according to which 'the Jews must never be expelled from the Kingdom of Bohemia.'

The inhabitants of the Jewish Town awaited the Empress's reply to the Council of Elders' request in great suspense and with at least some hope. Their dismay was, therefore, all the greater when the cursory answer arrived: 'The restrictions remain valid once and for all.' The



The well-known Huber engraving, showing the pattern and the streets of the Jewish Town from the year 1769.



A precise miniature model of the Jewish Town—in the foreground are the cemetery and the Klaus Synagogue and the roof of the Old-New Synagogue rises up between the houses. An original picture of the ghetto of the last century has thus been preserved.

only relief allowed was the extension of the time limit by a month to 25th February. Again and again the Prague Governors applied for instructions in order to play for time. And, in fact, the first small groups only began to leave the country during the summer months. By the end of 1745, 10,000 Jews had left the city of Prague, by the end of February the following year already 14,000 had gone to the surrounding country. Only the elderly, the infirm and those who cared for them were left behind, together with a few individuals who wanted to remain as long as possible near the graves of their forefathers and the forsaken homes of the ghetto. Thousands and thousands of Jews wandered in the neighbourhood of Prague throughout the bitter winter,

seeking whatever shelter they could find. They plunged through deep snow drifts with small children and were thankful when night fell and they could creep into the cattle sheds and empty barns which the peasants opened for them, thus at least softening their bitter fate by this small service.

On the eve of the end of the time limit a courier arrived at Prague Castle on horseback, bringing the Prague Governors a personal order from the Empress: 'Owing to the continuing bitter winter weather, We graciously postpone the time limit when the Jews are to leave Prague city to the end of March, and this is final.'

A messenger from the Governors trotted down to the Jewish Town that evening and the hoofmarks of his horse in the deep freshly fallen snow were the only mark of life in that formerly bustling quarter. It was late. Those who were still in the neighbourhood of Prague returned, but even for the 2,000 remaining, the unalterable final moment was now drawing near. Once more the Governors requested that a medical selection should be allowed to exclude all the unfit from those who were about to leave. About fifty elderly and sick persons, one doctor, a chemist and two or three nurses received permission to stay. And since it was necessary to assume that these privileged persons would soon die, the Governors also received permission to allow twenty-two members of the Funeral Brethren, four grave-diggers and one scribe to stay behind, in order to carry out the formalities of burial. Thus the final *Schutzliste* bore the names of eighty-one persons.

In the countryside the winter showed no signs of ending and 31st March drew inexorably nearer. There was a gloomy atmosphere in the silent streets of the Jewish Town. On the morning of the 31st, the last remaining inhabitants of the ghetto gathered for a final service in the synagogue and then went off to the Old Cemetery to take leave of their dear ones who had not lived to see this sad moment. The Elders of the Jewish community locked the doors of the synagogues, schools and Town Hall, and sorrowfully handed over the keys to the chairman of the commission responsible for the expulsion of the Jews.

That afternoon the people of Prague were witnesses to a sad spectacle. The last remaining Prague Jews took their tearful farewells of eighty-one privileged to stay, who had followed them to the ramparts of the Town. With their small carts and carrying sacks on their backs, they departed for the uncertain fate that awaited them in exile. The Prague ghetto was forsaken...

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A year passed and the damage done to internal and foreign trade resulting from the expulsion of the Jews began to be felt in ever-increasing measure. The Prague guilds protested, even the Governors protested. But the Empress was adamant. Two more years passed and the overall State finances began to be seriously diminished. That at last moved the Empress to admit her error—following intervention from Venice, Turkey, Holland, Britain, Sweden, Norway and several other foreign powers in favour of the Jews. In July 1748 Jews were once again permitted to live in Prague and on 25th September the first returning exiles came back to their desolate

Town. They had come on hard times and buried many of their dearest relatives in far off foreign lands. They found only a handful of the privileged eighty-one still alive and the reunion with empty dwellings was a joy mixed with great sorrow.

As Prague Jews wandering in all parts of Europe heard of the Empress's new decree, they began to return to their own country in ever-increasing numbers. Compared with the population that had formerly lived in the ghetto the numbers had fallen considerably, but soon there were enough of them to start on the renovation of their Town, on the reconstruction of their devastated and tumble-down houses. According to the 'Book of Repatriates' dating from 1749, the total number who returned amounted to 6,061 persons.

In short, no one can possibly know what tragedies were played out behind the walls of the ghetto in that fateful year 1745. Only the memories and tales preserved from generation to generation recall the course of events which almost brought to an untimely end the rich history of the most famous ghetto in Europe.

Old gas lamps to this day still lend the streets of the former ghetto the colour of the past, and nothing disturbs the patina of time, thus conserving the unique quality of this corner of old Prague.



Identification Mark

In 1941, when the Nazis introduced the wearing of the six-pointed yellow star as a mark of identification for all people of Jewish origin, they were not really inventing anything new. Hitler had been anticipated nearly 300 years previously by the Emperor Leopold, who introduced the identification of Prague Jews by the wearing of a circle in 1670. Leopold, however, lacked Nazi thoroughness and their bestial criminal code, so that his regulation soon fell into abeyance and was forgotten.

Following the return of the Jews from exile in 1748, however, the notoriously anti-semitic Hapsburg empress, Marie Theresa, recalled the circle and gave the order that the former regulation should be looked into. Less than two years later she had the Jewish community informed that as from 1st July 1750, all unmarried Jewish youths must wear a sign on their right forearm to distinguish them from Christians. It was to be a piece of yellow cloth, two fingers wide and about two inches long. Married men did not have to wear the mark as they were recognisable by their beards, which were worn by all Jewish married men at that time. The women and girls were to wear the yellow mark sewn to a headband.

When the regulation was read aloud in all Prague synagogues on 13th May, it was accepted fairly calmly by the men. They were not ashamed of their Jewish faith and therefore saw nothing humiliating in the fact that they had to admit to their confession by some external sign. With the women, however, it was different. In those days they were just as vain as their predecessors of the early Ice and Bronze Ages or their descendants who live in what is now known as the Atomic Age.

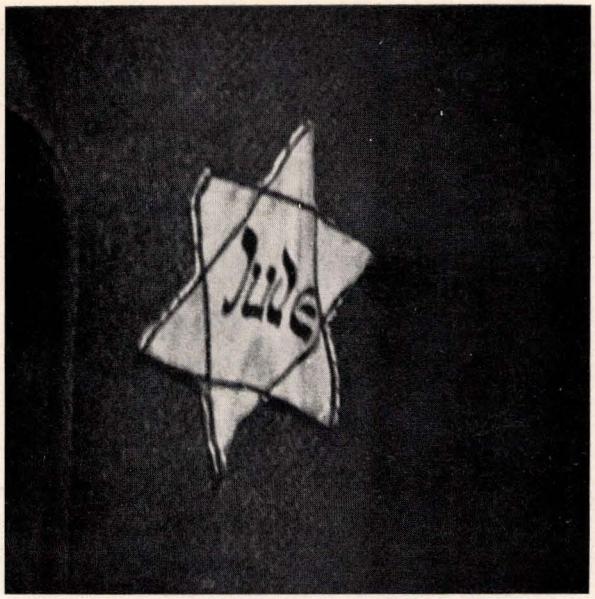
Naturally their vanity has expressed itself differently at different times. So in 1750 the Jewish women of Prague signed a special petition requesting that 'married and single women, to distinguish them from those of the Christian faith, should be allowed to wear a detachable

yellow ribbon in their caps or headbands, instead of the yellow piece of cloth.' Their request was, in fact, granted and the news was joyfully announced in all the synagogues on the 6th July.

Of course women's fashions never stand still and in those days, as today, to the great joy of the dressmakers and other craftsmen, they would also change from time to time. The time came when these changes began to affect even those that had formerly only indulgently smiled at their whims, namely the men. In fact, the men suddenly began to shorten their beards to such an extent that in 1755 the Prague rabbi, Landau, had to issue a religious instruction that every married Jewish man must have a beard at least half a finger long. The men did not take much notice of this order, with the result that five years later the Empress issued a regulation that from February 1760 all beardless Jewish men must wear a full-sized yellow cuff on their left arm.

A public order was, of course, something quite different from a religious instruction, which had only been obeyed by the truly devout. Now there was panic among the men, just as there had been among the women ten years previously, when they had been ordered to sew an ugly piece of material on to their beautifully embroidered headbands. Needless to say, the men would not humiliate themselves and refused to imitate their womenfolk by writing and requesting a gracious change in the order. In their memorandum they first of all merely asked for postponement of the date when the order was to come into force, with the excuse that there was not enough yellow material in Prague and the tailors would have insufficient time to sew so many yellow cuffs. This request was granted but, after the second period had elapsed, it was supplemented by a note saying that the yellow cuff must be sewn on firmly. The men, therefore, applied to the authorities with a new memorandum blaming the impossibility of carrying out the new instruction on economic reasons. To have firmly sewn cuffs would mean that each suit of clothing would have to have its own cuff—and where would the poorer citizens find money for so much material? The wearing of the yellow cuff had been ordered for Prague alone, which meant that each journey out of town would necessitate the wearing of special clothes! And the country Jews, in their turn, would have to have special clothes for each journey to Prague—surely the authorities must see that this would be impossible! Nevertheless, their pleading did not help them this time. The order was not repealed and, willy-nilly, the men had to have a yellow cuff sewn to each suit. The women only laughed at them, for with their 'humiliating request' as the men had called it, they had achieved what they wanted, whereas the men in their cleverness had not got anything.

During the later years of the rule of Marie Theresa social relations between the Jews and Christians took a more friendly turn. For instance, the younger Jews began visiting the theatres, they sat side by side with Christians in the coffee-houses and dressed according to the latest fashions. In order not to be conspicuous they tried to wear their identification mark so that it was almost invisible and thus the yellow cuff got smaller and smaller and was placed where it was hardly to be seen. Finally things went so far that this was noticed by the authorities and the Government issued a new severe order demanding the implementation of the imperial regulation regarding the wearing of cuffs and beards for Jewish males.



The star with the word 'Jude' in the centre was the modern version of the circle of ancient times. The purpose of the marking, however, was the same, namely to pour scorn and derision on the wearer.

It was not until 1781, in a memorandum signed by Chancellor Bluemegen and dated 13th May that Emperor Joseph abolished all orders concerning the identification of Jews. 'May all the humiliating and mentally oppressive measures be abolished which require Jews to wear special clothing or external identification marks' ran the memorandum. Thus 13th May 1781 marked the end of the external differentiation of Prague citizens according to religion.

It took a full five months before the Emperor's letter found its official way to the place where the decision had to be taken to put it into operation. It was not till 12th October 1781 that the provincial government issued an instruction to all regional governors, signed by Prince Fürstenberg, which perhaps tried to make up for the delay by the flowery manner in which it was worded.

'Most noble and honoured Sirs!'—meaning the Governors—'Since His Imperial Royal Apostolic Majesty has graciously decided—according to an instruction already received on the better treatment of the Jews—to abolish the differences formerly in force concerning Jewish clothes and fashions, it follows that the wearing of the yellow cuffs by young unmarried men and yellow ribbons by women is no longer in force. Honoured Sirs, please see to it that this imperial decision is made known to all magistrates and official authorities, so that no one will make any further difficulties for the Jews as far as their clothes are concerned, so long as they behave humbly and correctly otherwise.'

Thus the identification of Jews was finally abolished. The regional governors obeyed the orders of their superiors, and for a century and a half the Prague Jews enjoyed their freedom. A hundred and fifty years later, however, the ancient marking was reintroduced, in a much more brutal form. Shortly after their occupation of Prague the leaders of the 'thousand-year Reich' decided to reintroduce the use of the yellow colour for identification purposes, this time embellished with the comely form of the six-pointed star and the word *Jude* in the centre.

Pioneers

Health insurance was officially introduced in the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 30th March, 1888.

It is important to state 'officially', for unofficially more than 100 years prior to that date, three citizens of the Jewish Town of Prague, then part of the old Austria, founded an association which was the precursor of today's health insurance.

It was in the year 1771, long before anyone else in Europe had thought of anything similar. And a mere twenty-three years after the time when the first of the exiles began to reappear in Prague after the forcible expulsion of the Jews by Marie Theresa in 1745. The names of those three pioneers are barely known today: Simson Busch, Samson Joss and Jacob Katz.

Just imagine that twenty-nine years before the turn of the century these Jews founded a society to which all healthy inhabitants of the ghetto could belong, a society which collected monthly contributions and special gifts and guaranteed that in case of illness doctors, medicines and small monetary allowances would be provided, that if necessary the cost of a stay and treatment in hospital would be paid for and, in the case of death, all funeral expenses.

The society was called *Dereh yeshera*—'The straight way'—and had precise rules laid down for the aid to be provided for its members. 'As soon as a report is received that a member is ill, the society's servant must immediately go and see the patient and find out which doctor he wants to see,' ran the rules, which continue as follows: 'It is then obligatory to call the required doctor to the sick person, and he in his turn has the right to turn to another doctor for advice at the expense of the society.' And that was not all. The members of the committee—and it is interesting to note that this was not an honorary function—were in duty bound to visit the patient and, in so far as the illness demanded it, take turns in staying by his bedside through the night. If they were not capable of giving sufficient expert attention to the patient themselves, they could request the services of a nurse at the expense of the society, or the patient was sent

to hospital. In this case the chairman of the society was obliged to visit the doctor concerned and, by giving him a certain sum of money, would guarantee that the member of the society received special attention in the hospital. Sometimes the society would even send their members to one of the flourishing spas of that time for convalescence. In case of death, it would pay all funeral expenses, so that the deceased's relatives had no extra outlay, and in cases where the deceased had no male descendant, it would have the *Kadish* prayer for the dead said each day of the following year and afterwards on every anniversary of the death.

There is also an amazing regulation which stated that following recovery from serious illness the convalescents should receive financial support for a certain length of time, so that they would not have to work and earn a living during the time they were still weak from illness. The society could only refuse to grant such support in cases where the person concerned had brought the illness upon himself through carelessness or a thoughtless way of life.

From the revised regulations of the society, which were written down more than half a century later, it appears that some members found the acceptance of financial support embarrassing, as people who accepted charity were considered to be beggars. For this reason, it was expressly stated in the new regulations that the money of the society is neither alms nor charity, but assistance to which every member of the society has a right and which is therefore not humiliating for anyone.

Even more progressive than the Prague society was a similar association attached to the Jewish religious community in Kolín near Prague, which also introduced old-age pensions for members over sixty and provided financial support for members of the Kolín community who were not even members of the society at all. In addition, there was the interesting supplement to the rules which was supposed to guarantee the uninterrupted and smooth working of the society and to prevent the danger of some unscrupulous or dishonest functionary disturbing matters.

'The Chairman must not be a rich man,' said the rules, 'as the society requires the chairman to visit each sick member and rich men might do this unwillingly and with great distaste. The treasurer, however, must not be a poor man, so that he should not be tempted to touch the property of the society.'

The societies of Prague and of Kolín both continued to exist as mutual benefit societies up to the year of the German occupation in 1939, though they had lost much of their importance and were maintained from tradition perhaps more on paper than in reality. The names of the founders, the citizens of the Prague ghetto, Simson Busch, Samson Joss and Jacob Katz, are not mentioned in any encyclopedia. But the indisputable fact remains that these three Jews were the first pioneers in the field of health and old-age insurance.

The Barriers Fall

Up to the year 1848 life was very hard on the soldiers as they had to serve for fourteen years; it was also hard for the peasants, the artisans and the intellectuals. But the Jews had the worst of it. They had no rights, only obligations. They could not become artisans, as the guilds would not accept them as members; they could not own land and therefore could not become peasants. True, they were allowed to study, but they could carry on only the not very remunerative profession of doctoring; pharmacy, law and the notary office, teaching, and even work in the civil service were forbidden to them. They were therefore reduced to being traders, and even here they were subjected to restrictions. They were not allowed to sell salt and iron, and indeed there were many other commodities which could not be sold in their shops. They were forbidden to live in certain towns; in others they had to live in the ghettos. 8,600 Jewish families were permitted to live in Bohemia and 5,400 in Moravia. In addition to the domestic and commercial taxes which were paid by all citizens, they were also liable to the Jewish tax. They were mostly poor and scarcely maintained a living owing to all these worries. The Prague Jewish Town was already an anomaly, for in all the neighbouring countries the ghettos were no longer enclosed.

Jewish deputations had been to the authorities on innumerable occasions with requests that at least the special tax should be reduced. But they invariably returned without success. It was not until the time of Emperor Joseph II that the Jews finally received certain rights, were allowed to visit elementary schools, to found factories, and a few were even raised to the level of the aristocracy. But even the latter were subject to all the legal restrictions which affected Jews. It was quite clear to the Prague Jews—who constituted 7.2 per cent of the entire population of the metropolis—that their position could only be improved by a radical change. And that change was fast approaching. Revolution was about to break out throughout Europe and its slogans were progressive and free-thinking. The Jews knew which side they were on.

They had no wish to continue as slaves in their own country; they wanted to be free citizens. When the uprising started in Vienna, arousing enthusiasm throughout the Hapsburg empire, and when Prague itself began to be affected by these events, the Prague Jews knew immediately on which side of the barricades they would fight.

Francis Joseph came to the throne at the end of that eventful and decisive year, and in the constitution of March 1849 he decreed equality for the Jews along with all other citizens. They no longer had to pay the special Jewish tax and the *numerus clausus* for Jewish families was abolished for good. Real equality for the Jews, however, was not recognised till twelve years later, in February 1860. Such, then, was the calamitous path of the Prague Jews, under the rule of the Hapsburgs, in their search for equality and civil rights.

For a long time the town of Prague, separated as it was into Jewish and Christian sections, had maintained its divided character. Jews had not been allowed to move beyond the bounds of their ghetto and Christians could not and had not wanted to move into the dirty, overcrowded, unhealthy streets and houses of the Jewish Town. The first step towards change had come in 1811 when, as an exception, a few Jewish commercial *entrepreneurs* and industrialists, who needed more room for their undertakings than could possibly be provided by the dark narrow buildings of the ghetto, were permitted to move out into the neighbouring streets of the Christian districts of the town.

The next step came in 1813. At that time Europe was preparing for the wars which we know today as the Napoleonic Wars. In that year many foreign diplomats and generals were staying in Prague. They were busy making pacts, buying arms and discussing the diplomatic and military tactics of the coming war. By that time there were Jews among the many that provided weapons and equipment, and since the generals did not like to enter the dirty streets of the ghetto, they preferred to allow those Jews with whom they had commercial contracts to move out into the Prague Old Town. The first of these was the well-known banker, Simon of Laemmel, who moved his firm to a palace in Celetná Street.

Yet it was not until thirty-five years later that the barriers which separated the Jewish Town from the rest of Prague were finally removed. It was following the ascent to the Austrian throne of the new young emperor, Francis Joseph, who proclaimed a new constitution by decree on 4th March, 1849. It was this constitution which removed both the imaginary and the real boundaries between the Jewish and the other inhabitants of Prague. For instance, it abolished the restriction on the number of Jewish weddings, which till then had often led to them being secretly celebrated in lofts or similar places, or to young couples running away to neighbouring Hungary, where there was no such restriction. It had been in force in Prague for more than half a century, since the time when the decree of 1797 had limited the number of Jewish families in Bohemia to 8,600. In order to abide by this decree only eldest sons had been allowed to get

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The courtyards of the complex buildings used as dwellings in the old ghetto by the overcrowded poor of the Jewish quarter. They added a peculiar character to this picturesque former settlement of Prague Jews.



married, younger sons and grandchildren being forbidden to do so unless death reduced the number of families. Only Jews who had volunteered for military service, Jews who had actively engaged in agriculture or those who had worked for more than three years as fully pledged guild artisans, rabbis and experienced teachers, could acquire permission to marry without regard to the privilege of birth. Another restriction concerned the amount of property a couple had to own; in the case of country folk it was 300 guilders and in that of Prague Jews 500; in the case of a foreign Jewish girl marrying a Czech Jew it was as much as 5,000 guilders. The minimum age for a bridegroom was twenty-two, for a bride eighteen years of age.

Francis Joseph's decree of 1849 also guaranteed the Jews the right to administer their own affairs, and this soon expressed itself in the appearance in the Jewish Town of splendidly equipped social institutions such as orphanages, hospitals, schools and other institutes, with which the Jewish Quarter soon surpassed royal Prague. The Jews began by administering their own affairs through the religious communities, which were run at that time in Prague by nine great synagogues with a famous liturgical tradition. They were the Old-New, the Old, the Maisl, the High, the Klaus, the Cikánská, the Pinkas, the Great Court and the New Synagogues, as well as fourteen smaller endowed and other private establishments.

The greatest revolution for the Prague Jews was the fact that by the new constitution they were placed on an equal footing with Christians and could move from the ghetto at any time to the other parts of Prague. This was so surprising a fact for both sections of the population, that at first the permission remained largely on paper. There were, of course, Jews who wanted to make immediate use of the advantages arising from the lifting of the barriers, and as they came up against a lack of understanding on the part of the Christians, they preferred to move to America, as for instance was the case with the family of the well-known former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the U.S.A., Louis Dembitz Brandeis. In fact, a special English school was set up in the Jewish Quarter for these people and a society was founded to help finance propertyless emigrants. The great majority, of course, remained in their original homes even after the pulling down of the ramparts and many young people voluntarily joined the army, to show that they would not even shirk fighting now they were free and were guaranteed the same opportunities as others. A third group was composed of those who did not want to emigrate but also did not want to remain in their old homes in the ghetto. They chose a third alternative, leaving the faith and moving into other parts of the city as baptised Christians. Many Prague families would today be surprised if they were to look into the book of names of new converts to Christianity since the year 1775, for there they might find the names of their baptised ancestors.

The ramparts and other barriers were removed and the ghetto, now abolished, was incorporated by constitution into the other parts of Prague. As a mark of gratitude for their liberation from both the real and the mental ghetto, the Jews now called their Town the Joseph Quarter, in commemoration of their liberator, Francis Joseph, and from then on it became just one of the Prague districts. They appointed their first four representatives to the Prague

municipal council, and when the new Prague mayor was installed in office in 1849 and according to tradition was accompanied by the two oldest local representatives, one of the two was the chairman of the Joseph Quarter, Landau.

The Quarter had lost its independent position and the special commission which was directing its amalgamation with the Old Town decided that the Jewish community must now pay a requisite share of capital into community funds, so that the common property of the now united Prague city could be fairly shared by the Joseph Quarter. At that time there were 7,386 Jews in Prague and 58,810 Christians, so that there was one Jew for every eight to nine Christians. The share they had to provide amounted to 249,510 guilders. From that moment the Jews were allowed to make use of all the municipal institutions, such as those for the poor citizens of Prague, and to avail themselves of many other advantages.

To the great joy of the inhabitants of the Jewish ghetto, and despite the protests of the rabbis who were afraid of too swift an assimilation of the Jewish population, the last ramparts of the former ghetto which had been guarded in the old days by nine large gates, were finally pulled down. Suddenly the comparatively broad streets of the Prague Old Town were linked with the narrow alleyways of the ghetto, lined as they were on both sides by tall narrow houses which belonged, on the average, to twelve and sometimes even to as many as twenty families. Even the rooms were sometimes divided between two families, who simply marked out their respective sections with an ordinary chalk line.

So long as the ghetto still existed the Jews had only been allowed to trade outside its ramparts in the place now known as Havelská Street, but known in the Middle Ages as *V Tandléřích* (The Odds and Ends Market). During the time of Wenceslas IV this street, with its palaces of the nobility, its theatre, its burgomaster's house, the Carolinum University building and the best Prague hotel of those days—the Platýz—had constituted what one might call the hub of the social and commercial life of Prague. In fact, in those days Havelská Street was what Wenceslas Square is today, the main boulevard of Prague. In such circumstances it is not surprising that traders tried to settle there, promising themselves excellent profits from such a busy street. Thus a permanent market place came into being, which far surpassed the famous *tandlmarks* or trading centres of Vienna, Leipzig and other European towns.

The Jews were allowed to participate in the regular markets in Havelská Street, and they spread their stands from what is today known as Melantrich Street towards the Church of St Havel, while the Christians used the other side of Melantrich Street, towards the Coal Market. And even those Christians were as often as not new converts, Jews who had recently been baptised.

The market provided poultry, pictures, clothes, watches, animals of all kinds, books, agricultural implements, boots and shoes—in short, everything that is today sold in the larger department stores and much more. At an early stage this particular *tandlmark* became a European curiosity which foreigners travelled from all corners of Europe to see. In a fairly small area there were 300 large and more than 600 small shops surrounded by buyers and

sellers. The Jewish women, dressed in beautiful characteristic costumes with richly embroidered gold headbands with lace ribbons round their faces and velvet ribbons across their foreheads, only made this picturesque sight the more colourful. The vendors enticed and tricked the passers-by into looking at their wares and hundreds of eyes challenged, hundreds of voices shouted and hundreds of hands eagerly stretched out for the coveted goods.

When walking through Havelská Street today no one would believe that this had once been the Jewish trade artery of Prague, with more than 900 cellars, shops, shop windows and stalls. Not only that. In between the shops, as was the custom of the day, one could buy refreshments for a farthing a piece, hot bread and rolls straight from the oven, and beer and wine drawn straight from the barrels installed on the pavements. It was a kind of popular restaurant in the open to which members of the Prague garrison would come on their evenings off and from which loud bawdy songs or touching sentimental tunes could be heard long into the night. Threading their way through the crowds went the Jewish inspectors, whose task it was to keep an eye on the *tandlmark*, and woe betide any vendor caught at some mischief, either defrauding or overcharging in one way or another. He would immediately be placed under arrest in the Jewish Town Hall, severely fined and forbidden, once and for all, to sell at the market again. Hence it was not surprising that the vendors thought twice before committing any such fraud, and customers, knowing the honesty of the traders, came gladly.

When the Prague ghetto was finally abolished, the famous *tandlmark* went with it. Jews were now allowed to sell in all parts of Prague and so each one moved to some place where he had no competition, where he could sell under quieter conditions. One of the most remarkable sights of Prague of that period thus simply disappeared. And it was not only the *tandlmark* that disappeared. It was not long before the whole Jewish Quarter, which had been a breeding ground of illness and infection, had to make way for the introduction of sanitation. The owners of the houses of the former ghetto tried to delay the process of cleansing the city by lodging legal protests of all kinds at the courts, but in the end this tangle of narrow, dark, airless, crooked alleyways had to make way for more healthy modern homes. In February 1893 a law came into force concerning the levelling and drainage of the Joseph Quarter and the surrounding areas of the Old Town.

Today the visitor walking through this quarter has no reason to remember that formerly the ghetto used to be here. And it is almost impossible to imagine how this ghetto was made up of narrow bumpy streets in place of the present fine, broad, paved avenues. All is quiet, even in asphalted Havelská Street, and there is nothing to remind him of the glory of the former *tandlmark*.

Thus ended the era of the Jewish Town, later known as the ghetto and still later as the Jewish or Joseph Quarter. It was a time of complete emancipation and so the Joseph Quarter gradually assumed its present form, with nothing to distinguish it from the rest of the town. And yet, even so, the exquisite architectural and other memorials of that time, which have been preserved to this day, still make it one of the most interesting sights of Prague.



'The purchase and sale of old iron and metals, implements and skates,' runs the inscription above the famous second-hand dealer's shop belonging to Moses Reach, one of the typical former second-hand dealers shops of the Jewish Town.

The Poor of the Prague Ghetto

In my hand I hold an old, old photograph, yellowed with age. Time has gnawed at its formerly straight edge, but the expression of the faces looking out from it has remained unchanged. A large head of unusual shape, with thick lower lip and protruding forehead, a broad nose and a shock of hair—in fact a popular figure of pre-war Prague's Fifth District, the painter Guttmann. And a glance at the picture revives many memories of that period between the First and the Second World Wars.

The century-long hegemony of the Hapsburgs over the Czech Lands finally ended in 1918 and the breath of fresh air blew through the squares and avenues of the Joseph Quarter, now simply renamed the Fifth District of Prague. The new era brought new conditions, international economic relations helped to further an immense expansion of industry and this situation, as in the rest of Prague, resulted in external changes in the Fifth District. The owners of shops enlarged and modernised their premises, industrialists extended their factories, and prosperous citizens of the various quarters began building beautiful modern apartment blocks.

At the same time, however, an innumerable number of the Jewish poor were to be seen wandering through the streets of the former Joseph Quarter, beggars who were proscribed from the elegant new houses with their prohibitive high rents and were forced to live in the reeking tenement houses of the district, known as *Na Františku.* The majority of them were incapable of work, others could find no regular employment. They would leave their rooms every day and go begging through the streets from which they had been thrown out. No amount of such notices as: 'Beggars! We don't offer charity, we support the local poor' would put them off. Nothing worse could happen to them than to have the door banged in their face. Perhaps the neighbour would be more charitable. And there was always some good-hearted person to be found who had managed to save a few pence in order to alleviate the lot of his less fortunate fellow citizens.

Among the poor of the Fifth District, there were figures known throughout the whole of Prague: the fortune-teller 'Dr' Cohen, Hahn the cloakroom attendant at the Café Continental, 'Uhu' Kisch, Polák the glazier, the painter Guttmann, or beggar Weiss, popularly known as Hašile. Like the dozens of similar non-Jewish people from other parts of Prague, these Jewish figures were an inseparable part of the face of the Czechoslovak metropolis.

The most famous of them was Hašile. A former solicitor's assistant of unprepossessing, disreputable appearance, with a gait somewhat similar to that of Charlie Chaplin in his films, he wore a black hat, his wide rubber collar was turned up round his neck and his thin legs seemed to form the letter 'X'. He went from house to house, ringing at each door, and would ask the housekeeper or whoever opened it to him, whether the master of the house was in. At the same time he would say his name as though he were a personal friend and murmur some unintelligible words. Of course there was not a soul who did not know this trick of his, and everyone would bring him a small tip. But woe betide if it was too small. 'D'you think I'm just a *schnorrer*?' he would shout angrily, disturbing the whole house. All the same he would shove the coin deep into his pocket or eat the proffered left-overs and leave quietly.

In the streets he was always the butt of the children, who would run after him in groups and shout his name: 'Hašile, Hašile!' He would walk on a few paces as though he had not heard, then he would take his stick and chase the rascals, though he never did any of them any harm, of course. Later the boys found a new way of teasing him. They would greet him politely with 'Good-day, Mr Weiss!' which would delight the old fellow so much that he would skip around like an india-rubber doll, to the amusement of the entire neighbourhood. Then, as soon as they were at a safe distance, the boys would change the greeting to the bantering shouts of 'Hašile, Hašile!'

Hašile was not only known in the street and on the stairways of the apartment houses of the Fifth District, but also in the courts, where he would appear regularly once a month and accuse someone of slander or offensive behaviour. He was even better known in the editorial offices of Prague newspapers, where he would keep turning up and asking them to publish a *démenti* that there was no such person as Hašile, that he was Jacob Weiss, the son of respectable parents and a clerk by profession.

No less famous was the man whose picture revived these memories, the pre-war Prague painter, Guttmann, who would pace the streets of Prague with long, solemn steps, as though seeking some goal, and unaware of either his environment or the jeers of the young. He always walked bolt upright, he had unkempt curly hair, a green bow tie and starch collar, a brown velvet painter's jacket with a large yellow chrysanthemum in his buttonhole and beside it a small metal six-pointed star; under his arm he always carried a folder of sketches. Thus equipped he would tramp through Prague. In summertime he would get the obligatory chrysanthemum from the old flower-seller in the Coal Market, but where he went for them in winter, no one knows. Together with the unlighted cigar he always had pursed in his mouth, the chysanthemum formed an integral part of his whole being. And so he would tread the streets of the city, oblivious,

as though plunged in his memories of the wide, wide world which he had traversed from end to end on foot and from which he had always returned, again and again, to Prague.

No one knew what painter Guttmann lived on. I've also never met anyone who ever saw any of his pictures. The rumour was that some American university had been promised his skull after death for purposes of study and that he received a regular pension for it for the rest of his life. But this was not true. Guttmann often complained that he suffered from want and had to pay a high rent for the room he shared with two other people, that he had no studio and had to work in all-night cafés. In spite of his poverty he always had a few crowns that he had collected in his pocket and he would contribute to good causes so long as he was sure that he would then be mentioned in the papers. In such cases he would prefer to contribute five crowns twice than ten crowns once, for he was delightfully vain and loved to see his name appear in a newspaper. He was caricatured innumerable times in the Prague press, interviewed and painted, and he carefully kept all the cuttings himself.

During the war he was deported as number 554 in the first list of deportees to the Lodz ghetto. For a globe-trotter such as he, it was a form of torture to have to exchange his bohemian freedom for the narrow, over-populated ghetto, and it is not surprising that in less than a year from the time of his arrival there, he died in what for him were unbearable surroundings. He was buried by his compatriots in the Lodz ghetto cemetery on 15th March 1942, the day of the anniversary of the Nazi occupation of his native city, to which for the first time he was not to return after wandering in foreign lands.

How many Jewish figures inhabited the old alleyways of Prague during the period between the two world wars! They had spent their youth in the Prague squares and by the river, they had played rag-ball soccer with the other kids and, like them, enjoyed the magic packages and other attractions of the annual Christmas market in the snow-covered Old Town Square. Their parents had cared for them as all parents do. But once on their own in the world, they had been caught up in the whirl of life of that time. In Maisl Street they would buy the second-hand clothes of the well-to-do, and if they were lucky they would even get a job with one of the second-hand clothes dealers. Then they would offer their *primissima* goods to the passers-by, invite them in to inspect them in the interiors of the dark little shops, and if their enticing wheedling was of no avail, they would fight for their slice of daily bread by the most outrageous methods. They might even seize the hat of a particularly obstinate customer and take it into the shop, thus forcing its owner to follow them in and, willy-nilly, inspect the proffered goods. The less fortunate of them did not succeed in getting even that kind of employment. They would keep themselves alive by telling fortunes, by collecting subscriptions to some obscure periodical or other, and mainly by begging. They turned into figures like Hašile, Guttmann and the rest.

In my hand I hold a yellowing photograph of painter Guttmann with his Papuan hair, and for a moment he personifies the whole of that old world of the ghetto poor. He also formed an integral part of the picture of the Fifth District of that time. Today he belongs to the past,

a past only recalled through the chance handling of an old faded photograph, but if we are recalling the history of the Prague ghetto and later that of the Fifth District, we must not overlook these typical representatives of that era. They lived at a time when the ghetto had long ceased to exist, and yet one feels that the only way to describe them is with the words: 'the poor of the Prague ghetto'.

Little Heroes

With the exception of the largest and most beautiful synagogue in Vinohrady, which was destroyed by bombs in an air-raid during the war, all the synagogues of post-war Prague are as they were before the war. The only difference is that now they stand completely desolate. There is no one left to visit them, not even the rabbis to lead the services. They all stayed behind in the gas chambers of the concentration camps and the military cemeteries of the Second World War.

There are only two synagogues now which still serve their original purpose: the Old-New and the Jerusalem Synagogues. The latter, formerly known as the Jubilee Synagogue and now bearing the name of the street in which it is situated, is annually the scene, during the first week of March, of a memorial service for the youngest martyrs of the last war. A handful of survivors meet together in the large Moorish-style building to remember their own and other children who were swallowed up in the greedy caverns of the gas chambers before they had attained maturity.

It was the year 1944. For four years large transports of Jews had been regularly arriving at Auschwitz. The same picture kept repeating itself: the brakes of the engine scraped on the slope, and out of the cattle trucks crawled the wrecks of human beings that had been packed there like sardines for several days without food or water. The sorting out on the slope would take place quickly. The SS guards took a superficial glance at the travellers and with a jerk of the hand would divide them off into two groups, according to their ability to work or not—the first having to do a useful job of work before being gassed and the others taking the swiftest and shortest route to the gas chambers, there and then. Heart-breaking scenes took place on the ramp. Men could not bear to be separated from their wives, mothers from their children, children from parents. But the power of a pointed finger was greater than the tears and beseechings of several hundred condemned souls.

The Jubilee Synagogue in Jerusalem Street, built in neo-Moorish style, is one of the two Jewish houses of prayer in Prague still used for ritual purposes.



Once, however, the sorting out took an unusual form. It was in October 1943, on the arrival of a transport of Czech Jews from Terezín. It was a cold, gloomy autumn day. But to the new arrivals the pale sun seemed to be shining as in spring. Instead of the usual selection and immediate gassing of a section of the new arrivals, they were led off together to a specially enclosed camp, which from that day bore the name 'family camp'. This was for the simple reason that here, in contrast to the other parts of the Auschwitz concentration camp, whole families remained together. For six months these Jewish families from Bohemia lived in an unreal idyll. Whereas the usual concentration camp life was going on around them in all its cruelty, constant alerts, selections, pseudo-scientific experiments and mass murders, these 3,680 lived in this 'family camp' in comparative quiet and safety. The inhabitants of the other

parts of the camp and the barracks could not explain the situation. It was not till after the war that it came out that the inhabitants of that particular part of the camp were to be used as barter in exchange for foreign currency or for some much needed important industrial products. When the negotiations broke down and it was found that none of the allies was prepared to undertake such an exchange, the 'family camp' was no longer of interest to the Nazis.

It was on 9th March 1944, six months after their arrival in Auschwitz, that the liquidation of the camp began—following the enforced writing of greetings cards to relatives and friends—for well-organised slaughters must not disregard even such detailed deception of the outside world. The inmates, warned in advance by the Auschwitz underground organisation, had prepared a revolt. Not that it would have saved their lives, but at least many members of the guards would have been killed and in the course of the struggle all the wooden huts of the camp would have been burnt down. The smallest details had been thought of and prepared for. The prisoners even had the incendiary material already prepared. But the members of the SS succeeded in tricking the prisoners. They persuaded the majority of the inmates that they were about to be transferred to another working camp—and part of the group was not prepared lightheartedly to risk their lives by an action which was a lost hope from the beginning, when there was perhaps a tiny hope of being saved.

Morning dawned on the last day for three thousand six hundred and eighty old people, men, women and children. Reveille was at five o'clock, after which no one was allowed to leave the huts. The machine-gun nests surrounding the area were sufficient warning. And then the exodus began, in sections, to break up any possible revolt.

First came the children. The sun shone its golden rays on the final march of 600 little boys and girls from Bohemia and Moravia. At first they did not know where they were going. The distraught weeping of their mothers was no longer to be heard when they saw the chimneys from which poured thick grey smoke. The 600 youngsters suddenly realised where they were being taken. They had heard of the gas chambers long before being transported to Auschwitz and throughout their stay in the camps. But they kept their courage even when marching to their death. Then the heavy wooden gates opened and the children were led into the undressing rooms. It was not long before the thin naked bodies were marching forward to their huge common grave. The guards banged the great iron doors behind them and waited till destruction had done its work.

They stood there waiting and suddenly they heard the sound of singing. Inside, the children were taking leave of life with the moving melody of a song. It is not known which little hero had the strength of mind to remember the words while waiting in the arms of death. Soon more and more voices joined in, till finally all the 600 condemned little souls were singing. From the enclosed space, in which the smell of the deadly gas was gradually spreading, came the sound of the Czech national anthem, *Kde domov můj*—'Where is my country', a last greeting to their homeland. Then the voices gradually grew still, to give place to a terrible oppressive silence. It was the end.

In memory of the dead—for father, mother, sister, brother or other loved ones.



We cannot know the thoughts of the children during their last moments, we do not even know the thoughts of their guards. The heroism of those children, however, is what brings the handful of survivors together each year in March, in one of the two remaining Prague synagogues still serving as a house of prayer. And together they recall an action which is perhaps unparalleled in history.

They include some of the parents of the little martyrs, older brothers and sisters, relatives and friends. Their humble prayer is only a tiny memorial to an action which ought to be remembered and recalled every year by all humanity as a warning that would bring the world to reason, so that nowhere and at no time should such crimes again be committed against small, defenceless children.

A Museum in Medieval Walls

One of the most enchanting corners of Prague is to be found at the turn of the road that encircles the blocks of apartment houses opposite the Old-New Synagogue. At the bend in the road and visible from both ends of the twisting street, stand two buildings at right angles to each other. The first of them, built in 1907 in pseudo-Romanesque style as a ceremonial hall for the Funeral Brethren, evokes the impression of a miniature medieval castle with watch tower and all the architectural accoutrements of old castles and manors, while the other, a one-storey building in early Baroque style, without any external ornamentation and decoration, stands there as though sorrowfully dreaming and profoundly absorbed within itself.

If it could wake and tell its tale, it would be one of those legends of the old Prague ghetto in which melancholy and joyful events alternate, like showers and sunny weather in April. The history of this building, that looks on the world so gravely, began in a gloomy atmosphere. For some unknown reason Emperor Ferdinand at one time promised the Pope that he would expel all Jews from Prague forever. In 1561 he really intended to fulfil his promise and issued a decree by which all Jews in Prague were to be turned out. The famous Prague Jewish printer, Gerson, then went to Rome and begged Pope Pius IV for an audience, requesting that he absolve Ferdinand from his pledge. At that now famous audience the Pope granted his request and Emperor Ferdinand was able to repeal his decree. Indeed, a few years later, the sun began to shine on the history of this building we are talking about, for Ferdinand's son, Maximilian, ascended the throne and pledged himself to protect the Jews of Prague.

The inhabitants of the ghetto were overjoyed at this change. When news reached them that the

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The pseudo-Romanesque building of the old Jewish cemetery mortuary, which today contains relics of the historic development of the Prague ghetto.



new Emperor and his wife were to visit Prague, they hoped they could show at least part of their gratitude by the fervent and glorious welcome they would give him. It was the year 1571, when the Imperial family first came to Prague and took the opportunity to visit the Jewish Town. All the inhabitants of the ghetto gathered on the open slopes not far from the Old-New Synagogue where the Emperor and his wife were being received under a canopy by the Rabbi Aškenazi, *Torah* in hand. In commemoration of this event a new synagogue was then erected on the very spot and named the Klaus Synagogue.

It was not named after a specific person. In fact, the name Klaus in this case has a very interesting origin. The teacher of the Talmud in the synagogue at that time was the Senior Rabbi Loew Becalel and it was there that he founded his famous seminar for the teaching of the Talmud. His pupils had to live in enclosed rooms as in the cloisters of Catholic monasteries, strictly cut off from the outside world. It was from these cloisters that the synagogue got the name Klaus, from the Latin *claustra* or cloister, a fact known to only very few old inhabitants of Prague.

In 1741 the Bavarians and Saxons turned the synagogue into a granary and it was only after payment of a fine of 1,900 Imperial golden thalers that it was once again allowed to become a place of Jewish worship. Thus the history of this building continued to alternate between rainy and sunny weather. Nevertheless it outlived every storm that ranged around it and in the end its famous past saved it from the destructive inroads of the heartless regime under which Prague was rebuilt at the end of the nineteenth century, for the authorities eventually bowed before its historical importance and saved it from the fate that overcame so many other buildings in this quarter.

But there came a time, as is to be expected, when fate again toyed with it. The middle of the twentieth century was approaching and 35,000 Prague Jews were now suddenly caught in the vast prison of the 'Protectorate', in which they became helpless pawns in the hands of the occupation forces. Many were arrested immediately on the arrival of the Nazis in Prague in 1939, and even the others were not safe from bullying. The handing over of wireless sets, the ban on visits to theatres and public institutions, the introduction of the wearing of the yellow star, the ban on evening strolls—that was all only a beginning. It was not long before the first convoys began leaving the Sample Fair Palace in Prague for Terezín, Auschwitz, Birkenau and the other concentration camps. The Fifth District was being depopulated.

And then the Nazis had a peculiar idea. In 1942 they issued an order that all *Torahs*, gold and silver jugs, candlesticks, rare engravings, prayer books, pictures and manuscripts from all the deserted Jewish synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia should be brought to Prague. They began to establish a vast museum, so that when the Czech Jews had all been wiped out they would hold the unique relics of their past culture. After completing their work of destruction, they wanted to have a memorial to an exterminated group of the population, just as the remains of the ancient civilisations of the Incas and Aztecs have been preserved.

The inverted emotional relationship of the criminals to the sacred affairs of their victims created the grotesque situation of laying the foundations for the establishment of a museum

commemorating those they had sent to their deaths in thousands. The Jews themselves were forced to build this museum dealing with their own annihilation. As the individuals departed and the services in the synagogues ceased, only a few silent religious objects were left in the deserted buildings. A small group of those left in Prague expressly for that purpose had to gather them together to form a vast collection.

The looted trophies of the persecuted Jews increased in number, the collection grew and the unused empty spaces of the Prague synagogues began to be filled with the fruits of the labours of pious hands through the centuries. Thousands of beautiful woven and embroidered screen curtains and priceless *Torahs*, into which had been woven so much Jewish sorrow, began to find their way to Prague from all corners of the Czech lands.

The director of the German Central Office, Guenther, opened the museum to the public in the expectation of stirring up anti-semitic feeling among the people. But the collection made a different impression on the visitors from that which had been intended. Beautiful, artistically perfect objects, examples of the religious and family life of the Jews, spoke to them in the language of past times and showed up the many crimes and iniquities. They evoked feelings of pity and injustice rather than of hate, so that the instigators of the collection had to close it to the public.

The last three years of the war drew to an end. Long before the plan to build an exhibition in memory of an exterminated group of the population of Prague had been carried out, the 'thousand-year Reich' had ceased to exist and the occupation forces had left Czechoslovakia. Work on the collection was halted for a time. But the remnants of Prague Jewry slowly began to return to Prague from the concentration camps and the Allied armies. It was decided that the work should continue and that the Prague Jewish Museum should be completed. It was not to be a memorial to an exterminated ethnographical group, as had been intended by the originators of the plan, but it was to become a museum of the glorious history of Czech Jewry from the first available documents of their arrival in Prague up to the time of the Second World War, when the great majority of citizens of Jewish origin—77,297 to be precise—were systematically murdered in starvation camps. Thus the museum was to become not only a fascinating documentary testimony to the evolution and development of the life of the Jewish inhabitants of the Czech lands from the oldest times to the present, but also a reminder of the destructive work of human hands and brains, the result of the indecision and indifference of the surrounding world to a movement which wanted to lead the world back to darkness.

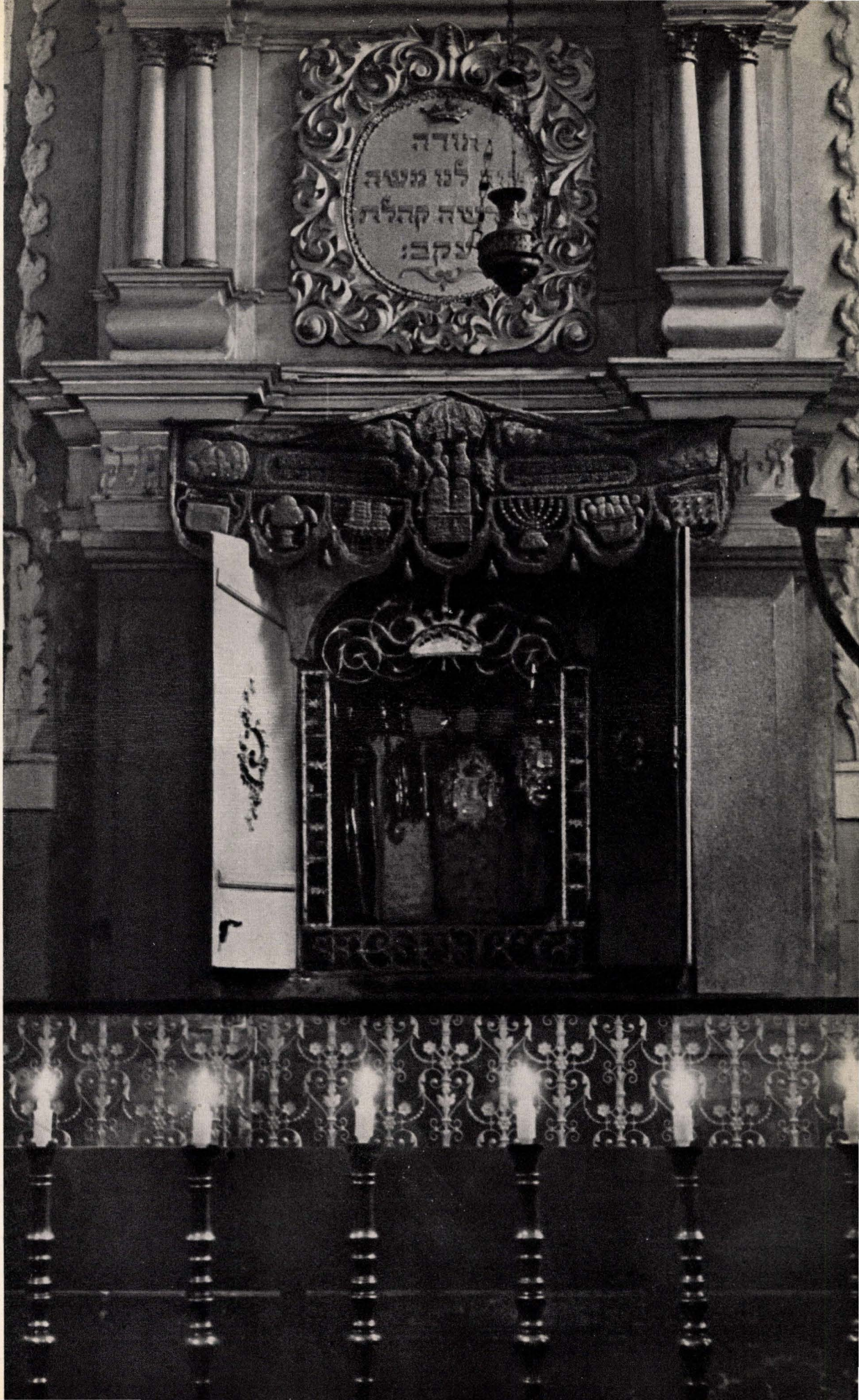
With the nationalisation of all museums in the Czechoslovak Republic, the State also took over administrative responsibility for the Prague Jewish Museum. The collection was increased and re-arranged, and, to judge by the signatures and comments in all European and many non-European languages in its visitors' book, there is probably hardly a foreign tourist who leaves Prague today without having seen these unique exhibits.

Today one can walk through the halls of the Klaus, Maisl, and High Synagogues and examine the exquisite cultural objects which have existed for centuries in the various towns and villages

of Bohemia and Moravia, where Jewish community life formerly flourished and then perished during the last war. From the cradle to the grave the lives file past of those who at some time or other created these magnificent hand-made objects, treasures which witnessed so many joyful and so many tragic events in their time. With the help of pictures, documents, drawings, photographs and a great variety of original exhibits, the whole manifold life of the ancient Jewish Town passes before one's eyes, depicting something which one has so far read about only in books. One stands humbly before the work of the Jewish lacemakers, the tinsmiths and pewter craftsmen, the goldsmiths and book printers. The guild emblems of the tailors, butchers, cobblers and others draw one's attention to a significant fact about Prague, for, with the exception of Poland, artisan production among the Jewish population of Europe was nowhere so advanced and developed as it was in the Prague Jewish Town. In spite of the fact that Jews were, in general, forbidden to make a living as artisans, within the Prague ghetto itself, from time immemorial, artisan production had been carried on to serve the needs of the community there. There were guilds of scribes, doctors, musicians, button makers and others, whose work, emblems, tools and statutes are now on view in the museum. Museum workers are busy examining, measuring, photographing, preserving and evaluating the collected objects, reconstructing plans of the original Jewish settlements and publishing the results of their research in both short and more detailed monographs. The museum has a large and growing section dealing with maps and plans, and they deal with the growth of the ghetto from the eighth until the end of the eighteenth century, from the arrival of the Jews in Prague up to the time of the Edict of Toleration of Emperor Joseph in the year 1781. The museum today has over 40,000 archive entries, 6,000 silver plaques, 4,000 *Torahs*, and 2,000 curtains of heavy silk, velvet or brocade richly embroidered in gold and silver, hemmed with Hebrew inscriptions and sewn with rubies and coloured glass pearls.

The horrors of the occupation period now over, the sun once more shines on the Klaus Synagogue, which is adding another chapter to its already famous history. And even though it has probably parted once and for all from its ancient function and mission, it now has the task of spreading knowledge of the life and work of the people for whom it once was a place of spiritual solace and peace. Without adornment or decoration, as though sorrowfully dreaming and completely retreating into itself, this solemn ancient one-storey building looks out on to a quiet lane, which hardly seems to belong to the modern life of our time. If it were not for the neat pavement, one could almost imagine that, tucked away in the little area around the Klaus Synagogue, it had been possible to preserve a small part of the ancient ghetto of Prague.

The sacred scrolls are today again to be seen in the open screen of the Klaus Synagogue.



Life Goes On

The whirlwind passed. And scarcely a sixth of the 35,000 pre-war Jewish citizens of Prague survived the horrors of the war. Only a small remnant returned from emigration, from the Allied armies and the concentration camps to the city whose Town Hall is adorned by a statue of the great Rabbi Loew, as a symbol of the equality of all citizens regardless of religious conviction. They returned to the city which bears the six-pointed star in its municipal emblem, to the city where a statue by one of the greatest Czech sculptors stands once more on the slope beside the Old-New Synagogue, despite its removal by the Nazis during the occupation. It is a statue depicting the biblical figure of the Jewish prophet, Moses. They returned to the city which had earned itself among Jews throughout the world the title 'City and Mother in Israel'.

While synagogues and everything connected with Jews were being burnt and destroyed during the war in all the neighbouring countries, in Czech towns the occupation forces were unable to rouse the population to similar excesses. Jews had always lived here under better conditions than their brethren in neighbouring states. The Bohemian kings and princes had taken them under their protection and had not allowed them to become the victims of unjust passions as in those countries. Charles University was one of the first in Europe to accept them as students and professors. And even on the occasions when certain individuals succeeded in rousing the mob against the Jews by means of slander and natural superstitious inclinations, there were always people to be found who fearlessly opposed the majority and finally succeeded in convincing the more sensible sections of those that had been misled. This of course had a marked influence on the development of the Jewish community itself, in all the various fields of cultural, political and economic life.

Under these conditions it is therefore not surprising that the names of scientists and scholars of world renown are to be found at all times in the history of the Prague community of Jews.



The Moses statue, the work of the Czech sculptor, Bílek, again adorns the park in front of the Old-New Synagogue.

Many universally known Jewish writers and artists of our own generation produced their first literary efforts here in Prague, or at least are firmly anchored through their works to the atmosphere and surroundings of their birthplace. Franz Kafka, today one of the most widely read novelists of world literature, Franz Werfel, author of the famous *Song of Bernadette*, the journalist, Egon Erwin Kisch, also Max Brod, a typical member of the 'Prague literary school', the well-known dramatist, František Langer, whose plays have been performed on the greatest stages of Europe, and many others, are all direct descendants of the inhabitants of the original Prague Jewish Town, or at least in their later life absorbed the peculiarities of its atmosphere.



In memoriam—inscriptions on the graves of the new Prague Jewish Cemetery, in memory of those who perished in unknown far-off lands and whose ashes have been scattered, no one knows where, in many different parts of Europe.

The synagogue in Dušní Street in the Prague Old Town, one of the largest of the Czechoslovak metropolis.

A visitor to Prague today would naturally seek in vain for the Old Jewish Town. Rabínská, Úzká, Šmilesová, V Kolnách and other streets have disappeared, never to return. Today's broad and level avenues with their imposing apartment houses give no hint that this was once the site of the ghetto. Prior to the war, the majority of the inhabitants of this quarter were still Jews, though the population was by then so mixed that it had long been impossible to speak of it as the Jewish Quarter. Yet in spite of the fact that Jews had long lived in all parts of Prague on equal terms with the other citizens of the city, this district—with its Jewish Town Hall, its museum and numerous synagogues—constituted a kind of spiritual centre of Prague Jewry.

The life of the Jews in post-war Prague was somewhat unsettled at first. The majority of them had lost their nearest and dearest and they had to begin to build their lives on the ruins of the



past. The number of new inscriptions on the old gravestones in the new Jewish Cemetery at Strašnice increased greatly, showing how the few that had survived wished to commemorate their children, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters or parents, whose ashes had been scattered in unknown places throughout the length and breadth of Europe.

Only a small number of those that returned, rejoined the ranks of the Jewish community. 'If the Lord could suffer so much evil,' they would say, 'there is no sense in praying.' At the same time, however, many orthodox Jews moved to Prague from the eastern parts of the Republic. They still did not deny God the right to punish man, even if the punishment meant the mass murder of Jews, as in the last war. These brethren congregate round the Old-New Synagogue, whereas the majority of Prague Jews who now adhere to what is called the more 'liberal' trend have made the synagogue in Jerusalem Street in the Prague New Town their centre.

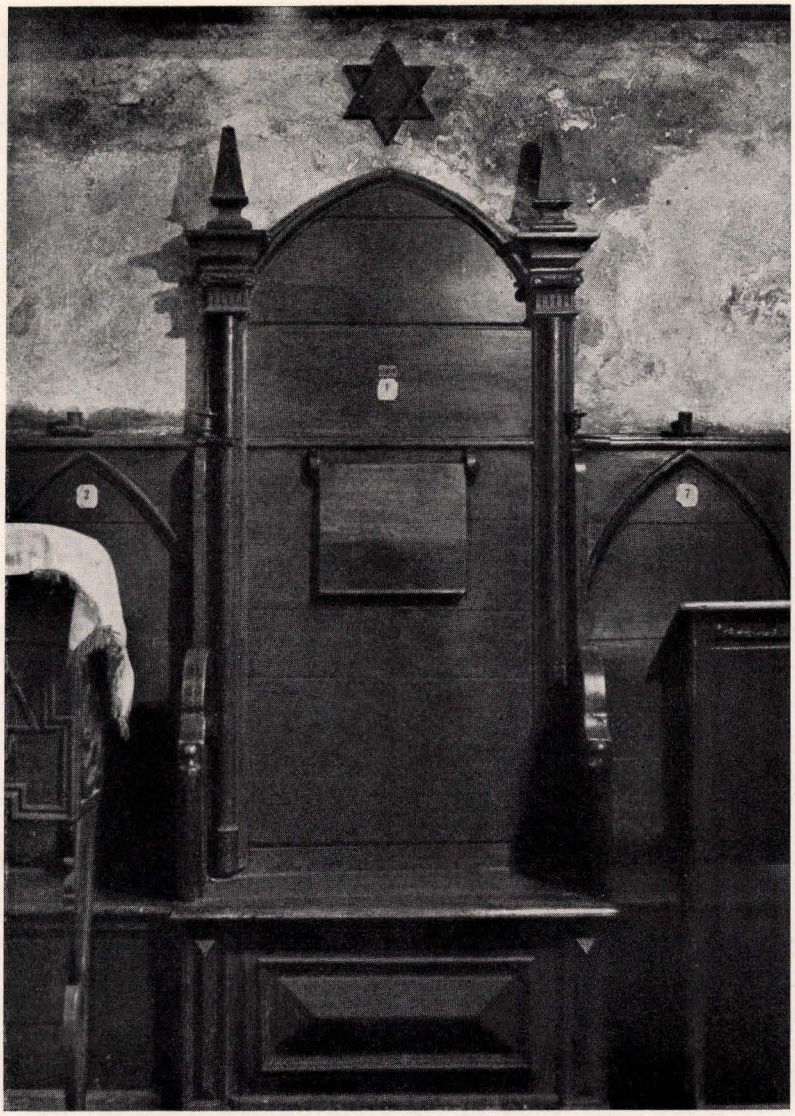
These are the only two of the original fourteen Prague synagogues now used for religious purposes. But the problem was not only one of few believers. During the war nearly all the Jewish priests of the Czech Lands were murdered and it was necessary to fill the post of Chief Rabbi, the post with the famous tradition founded by the great Rabbi Loew, which had been occupied through the centuries by a number of men who had stood out as beacons of courage, wisdom and foresight amidst the raging storms of their times.

Following the departure of the Chief Rabbi, Dr Brody, Dr Aladar Deutsch temporarily took his place on one of the most famous ecclesiastical thrones of the Jews, the great chair—still preserved, and yet once the seat of the creator of the Golem in the Old-New Synagogue. Shortly after this, however, the war broke out and Dr Deutsch went his way to Terezín, along with his fellow believers. In these harsh surroundings, so hard to bear for a person of his age, he soon fell ill and returned to Prague a mere shadow of the man that had been known by the people of Prague in the pre-war period. True, he continued to walk around as before, his picturesque head slightly bent to one side, but gradually he was to be seen less and less. He took his place as just a member of his community, huddled in the place reserved for Rabbi Loew in the Old-New Synagogue, where out of piety no one had been allowed to sit for decades after his death.

By this time it was necessary to make a decision about who should take his place. Like other religious communities it had formerly been the practice in Prague to call in a Chief Rabbi from abroad. This custom dated far back into the past, when there had been the fear that a native-born family would acquire too strong a position and that there was a danger, therefore, of unnecessary conflicts arising. This time, however, it was thought that an exception should be made.

Dr Gustav Sicher, the rabbi of the largest pre-war Prague synagogue in Vinohrady, was now called upon to fill this distinguished post. His own synagogue no longer existed, having been demolished in an air-raid during the war. He was now called to fill a more exalted and famous post. The chair of the Chief Rabbi in the Old-New Synagogue awaited him. But he had the high oak stool covered with a strip of black linen and he himself sat modestly just beside it, for he did not want to occupy the chair hallowed by the great names of his predecessors.

The original chair used by the great Rabbi Loew in the Old-New Synagogue and formerly the seat of the Prague Chief Rabbi. Today, in hallowed memory, the seat remains empty.



Dr Sicher's sermons had been famous in Prague before the war and had often drawn people to the Vinohrady Synagogue who otherwise never entered a place of worship. A fine speaker, a no less brilliant teacher with a wonderful touch with children, an exuberant sense of humour not usually associated with a rabbi; that is the picture in the minds of most of the people who ever came in contact with him. During his term of office Jewish life slowly began to revive again in Prague. A popular restaurant was opened in the Jewish Town Hall and observes orthodox precepts. On feast days and religious holidays the large hall of the same building is the scene of afternoon festivities for children and in the evenings there are cultural programmes and dances for the grown-ups. In one of the other districts not far away, a Jewish meat shop was opened that was directly under the surveillance of the rabbi. Religious teaching was organised for



One of the inmates of the Jewish old people's home in the spa town of Poděbrady lighting candles on the Sabbath.

children. The elderly, lonely people were brought together in the beautiful old peoples' homes in Poděbrady, Mariánské Lázně and Brno. In short—life again began to revive around the ancient Town Hall in the centre of the former Jewish Town. And it still goes on, in spite of the fact that close by it we find the museum, the old cemetery and the memorial in the Pinkas Synagogue to the 77,297 victims of the Nazi persecution, places originally marked out to be relics of an extinct group of Prague citizens. They are the remains of a Prague district that has disappeared, that had been closely linked with the history of the city, the scene of a life that has

been described in dozens of tales, novels and artistic works by ancient and contemporary, native and foreign writers and artists of world renown.

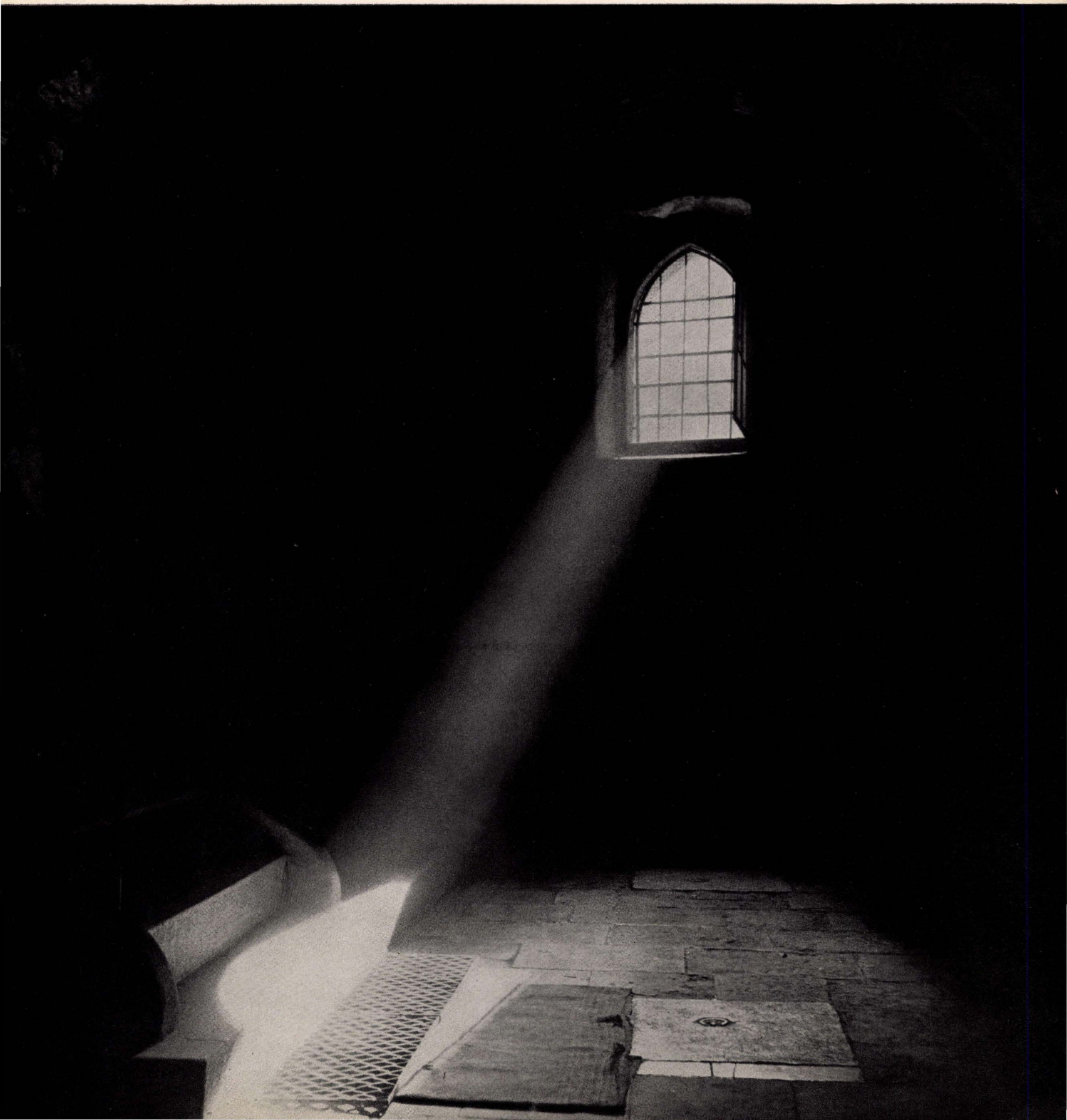
The founders of the 'Memorial Museum to the Extinct Prague Jews' notwithstanding, life goes on there to this day, and neither has the ancient term 'Prague—a city and mother in Israel' disappeared from the terminology used by Jews throughout the world. The horrors of the war were not able to destroy all that had been built up there over the centuries, were not able to break the determination of the remaining survivors to live out their modest lives there in peace and quiet. If Prague chief rabbis were to carry on the tradition of their medieval predecessors, who had their own coats of arms, the emblem today would bear the traditional symbol of the Prague Jewish community, the six-pointed star of David with a Swedish helmet in its centre, and beneath it would be inscribed the principle of the Jewish faith: *Shalom, shalom, le karof ve rahok*—'Peace, peace to the near and far'.

PLATES



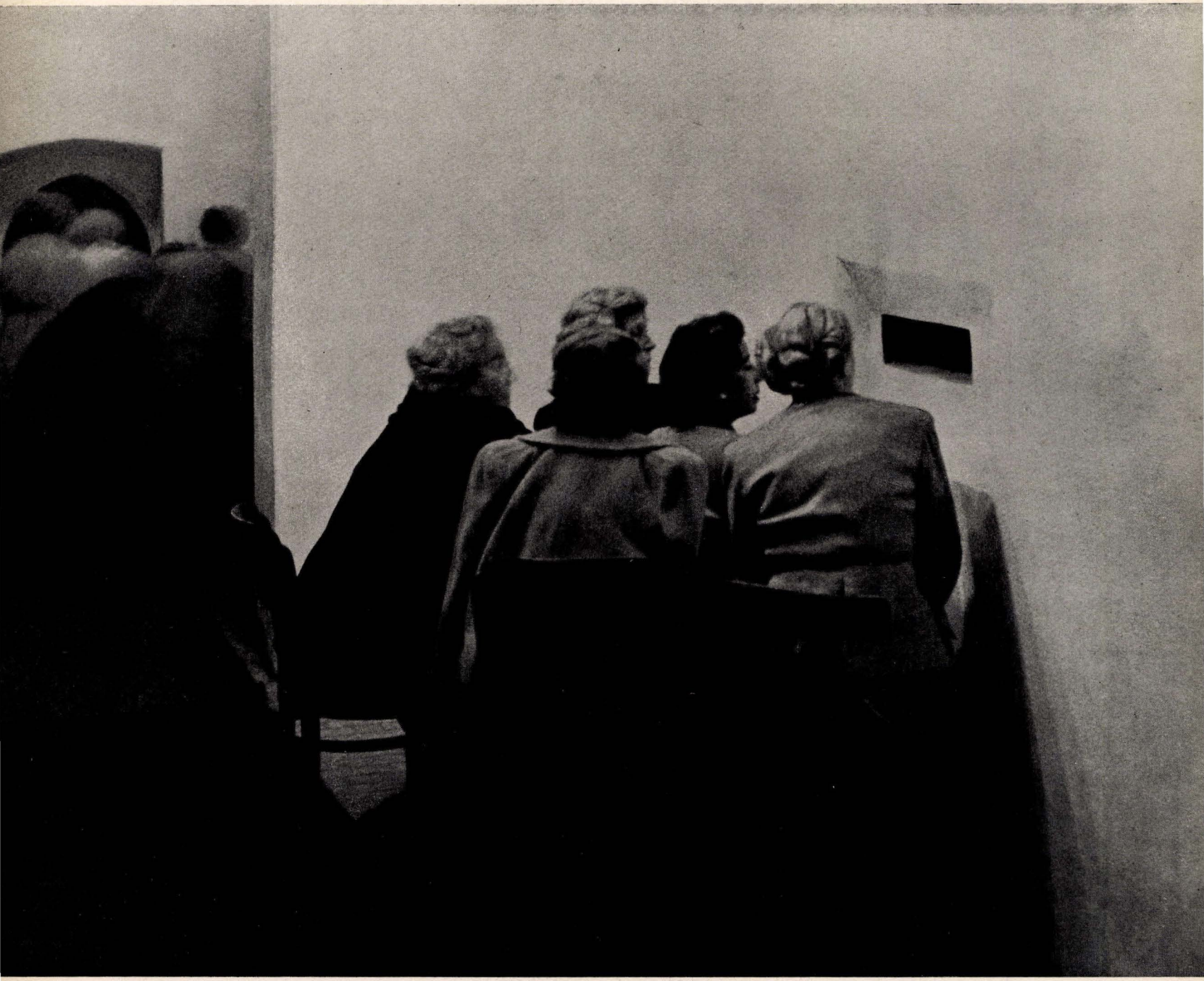










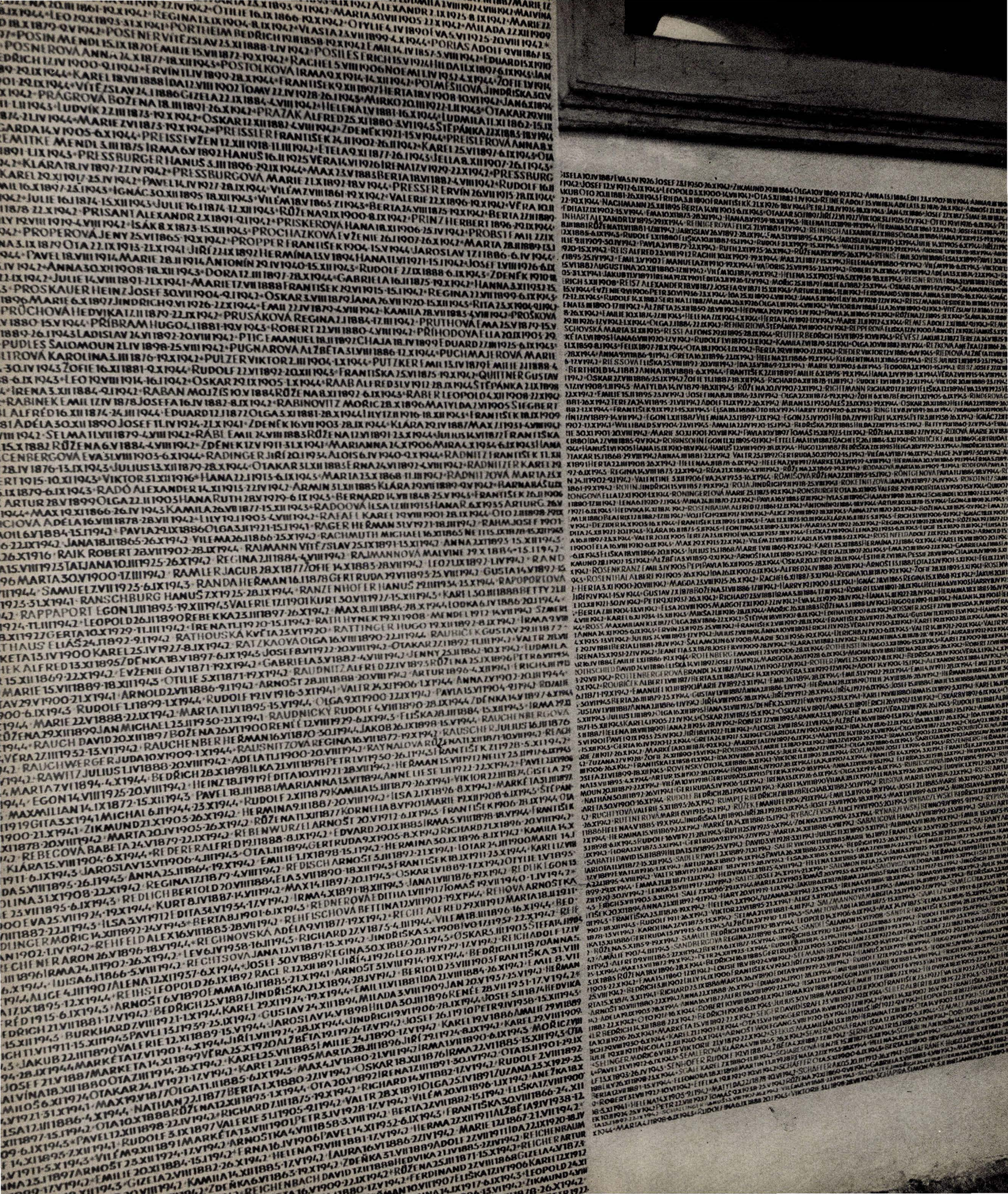






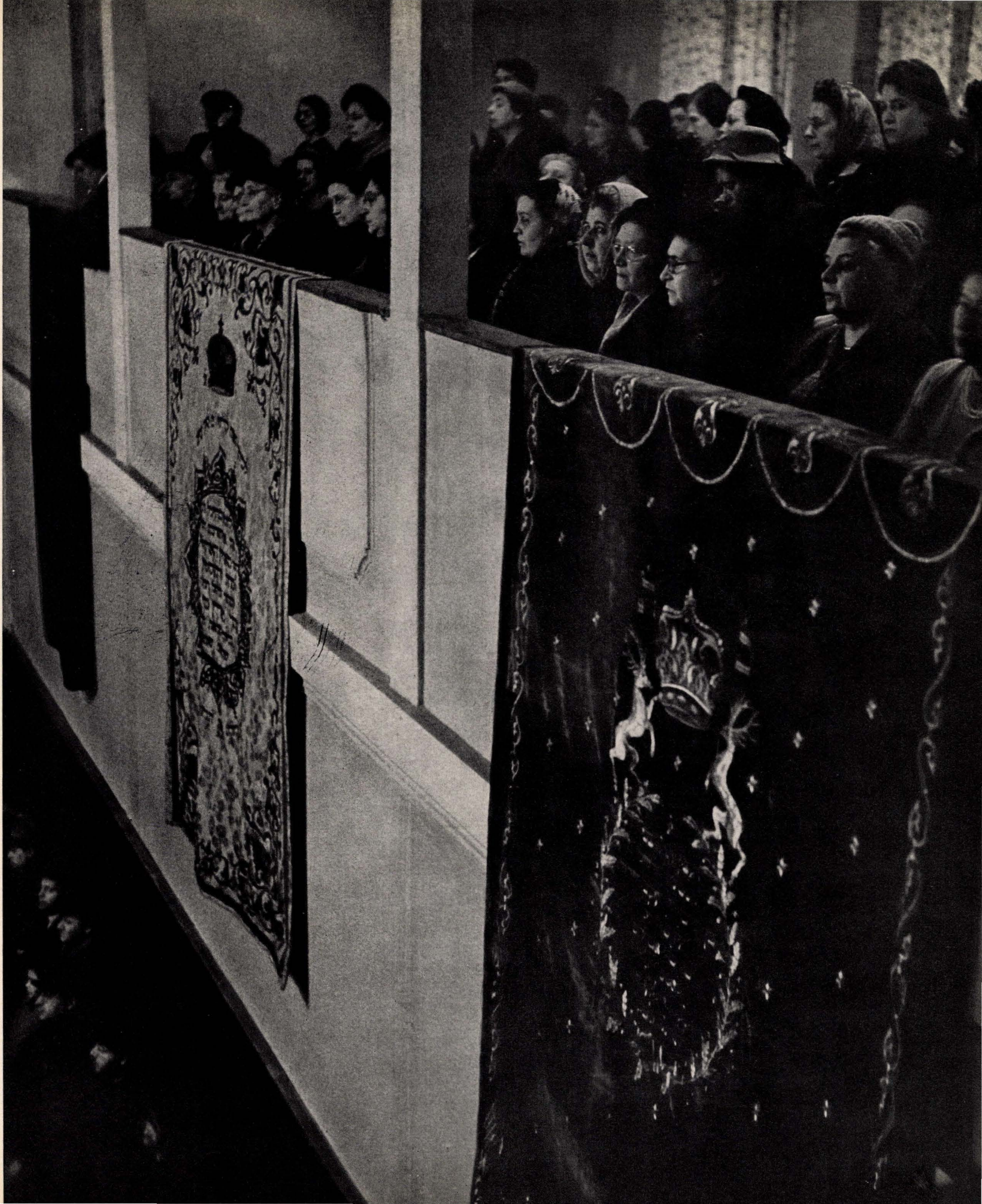



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JUDE












LUDMILA LÖWIOVÁ
1871 — 1945
PAMÁTCE UMUČENÝCH NACISMEM:
DĚTI:
ARNOŠT
ERIK
ARNOŠTKA
ROZ. SCHÜTZOVÁ
ELIŠKA
PROVD. TELIŠOVÁ
BEDŘIŠKA
VNOUČATA:
HANUŠ
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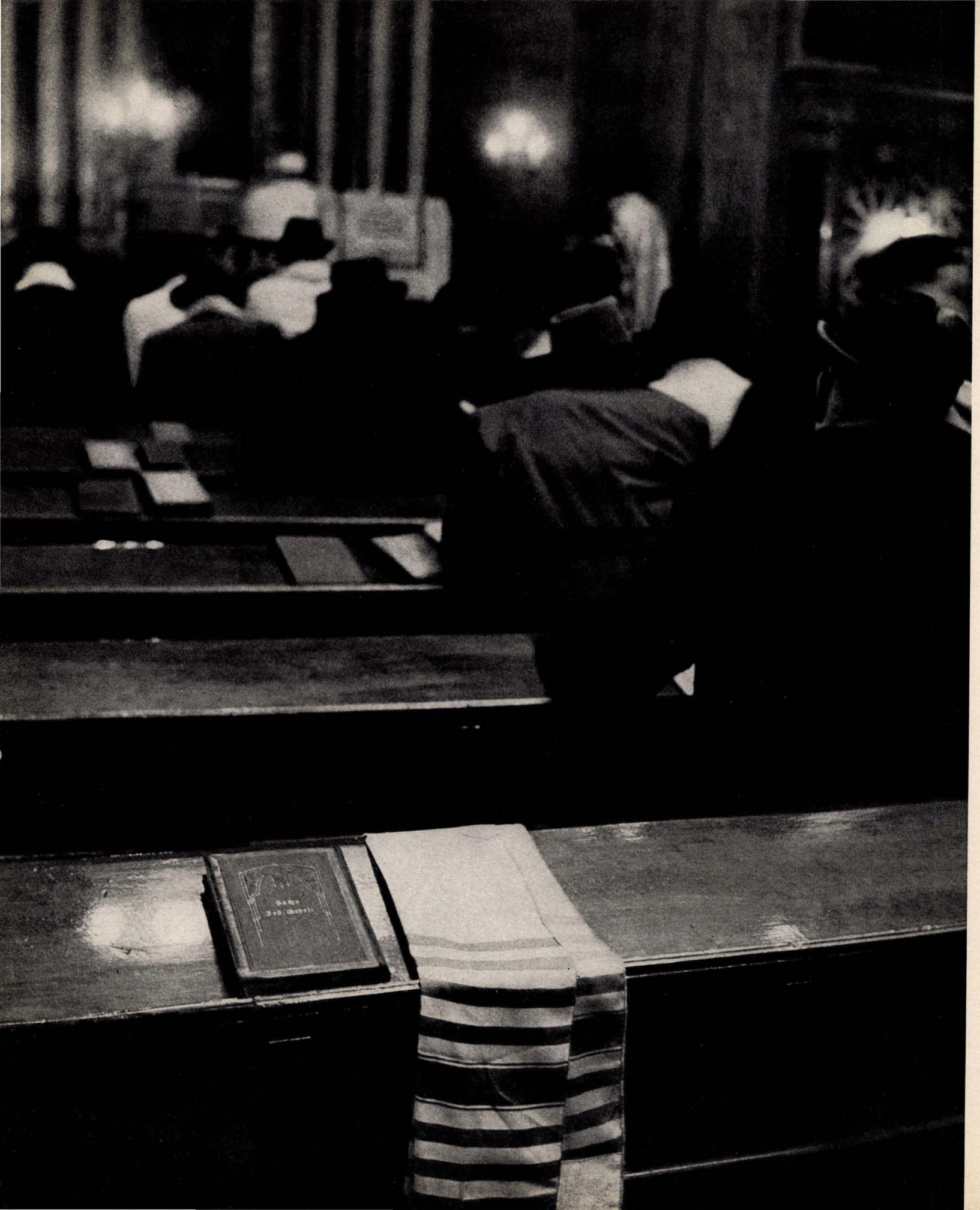




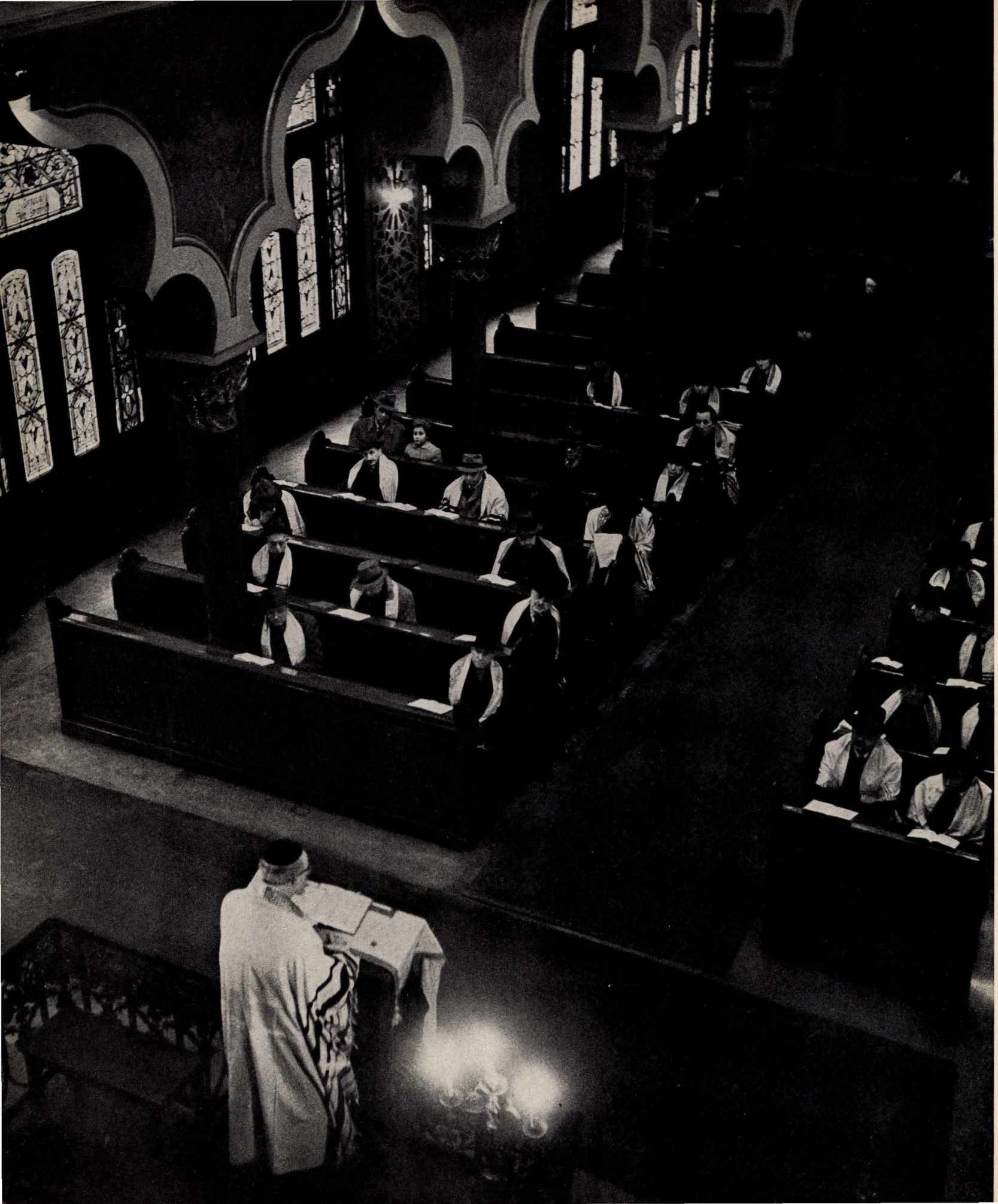





ואנ׳ תפלת׳ לך















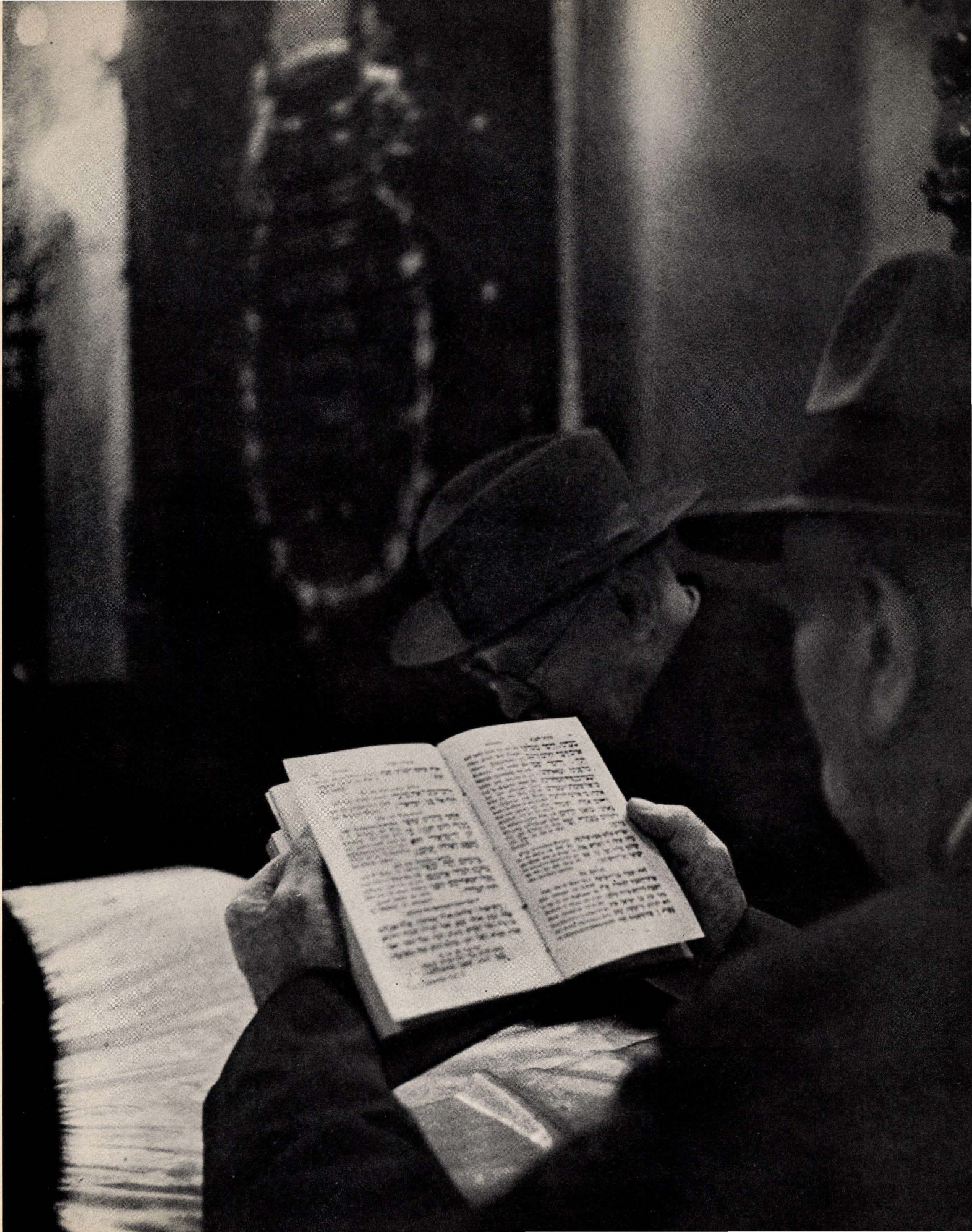







סוכות תשכ"ו
עצרת ימים
יוסף
יעקב







LIST OF PLATES

1 — 14

1 The place reserved for the prayer leader, lying below the level of the floor of the rest of the synagogue; 'from the depths I call to Thee, O Lord!'

2 View from the windows of the Jewish Town Hall looking on to the roof of the Old-New Synagogue, beneath which, according to legend, lies the miraculous Golem.

3 The Gothic vault in the Old-New Synagogue purposely provided with a fifth arm so as to avoid the shape of a cross on the ceiling.

4 The passage of this, the most ancient, Prague synagogue used to serve as the schoolroom for the children of the ghetto in olden days.

5 The clock in the passage of the Old-New Synagogue which indicates the times at which the various services will begin.

6 The ornamental relief above the inner entrance to the synagogue and the view through to the central aisle.

7 The view through the narrow slit in the walls by which the women can watch their menfolk at service in the Old-New Synagogue.

8 The men gathered together in prayer round the central aisle.

9 The Old-New Synagogue altar. On the right hand side, the chief rabbi's chair.

10 Mural candle-sticks from the time when flames of kindled oil constituted the only means of lighting used in the dwellings and prayer-houses of the old ghetto.

11 Awaiting transport—a young Prague Jewish girl on the day of her enforced transportation from her native town. The girl was one of the few who endured the sufferings of the concentration camps and yet finally returned to Prague.

12 The former Pinkas Synagogue today serves as a memorial to the 77,297 Jews of the Czech Lands martyred during the years of the Second World War.

13 Each year on the Day of Atonement the living recall the deceased members of their families in their prayers, those who were swallowed up by the crematoriums, the gas chambers, the prison-cells and the fields of battle of the Second World War. The innumerable burning candles are a testimony to the fact that the former flourishing Prague Jewish community was almost destroyed during the six years of the war.

14 The sermon at the memorial service on the anniversary of the day the Czech 'Family Camp' was destroyed at Auschwitz.

LIST OF PLATES

15 — 29

15 Seated closely packed in the gallery are the widows, mothers, sisters, daughters of the murdered ones, those who by some miracle managed finally to escape from the infernos of the concentration camps.

16 An alley of poplars in the new Prague Jewish cemetery in Strašnice.

17 The names of the husbands, children, parents, brothers and sisters, on the graves of the new cemetery are the last honours done to the memories of those persons who disappeared during the course of the Second World War, never to return.

18 Here, in the disorderly confusion of the old Jewish Cemetery, stand the silent witnesses to life in days long past.

19 Weeds are the only adornment with which nature disturbs the uniform grey of the stone forest.

20 The meeting of two ages: the old grave-stones and the Old-New Synagogue recall days long since past amid the modern blocks of flats and broad paved avenues.

21 Still life in an old synagogue: prayer books that have lost their former owners.

22 View of the women's section of the Jubilee Synagogue.

23 Formerly, the seats in the synagogue were all occupied. Today they are nearly all empty.

24 Dr Gustav Sicher, Chief Rabbi of the Czech Lands.

25 View of the men's section of the Jubilee Synagogue, sometimes known as the Jerusalem Synagogue, during the New Year Festival celebrations.

26 A service at the Jubilee Synagogue in Jerusalem Street, one of the most imposing of all Prague's synagogues.

27 The Chief Rabbi of the Czech Lands blessing the younger members of the Prague Jewish community.

28 Eight-armed candle-sticks in all sizes and styles adorn the roomy halls of the Prague Jewish Museum and the remaining synagogues. They are the artistic works old master craftsmen, silent testimonies to the glorious and tragic eras of the Prague ghetto and at the same time a symbol of the everlasting victory of truth and light over the forces of retrogression and darkness.

29 The Prague rabbi leading the congregation in the traditional prayer before the commencement of the Feast of the Passover, which has been preserved unchanged for many centuries.

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30 '*Ma nishtana*'—'In what way does this night differ from all other nights?' asks the youngest member—according to custom—of those partaking in the Feast of the Passover supper prepared in the large hall of the Jewish Town Hall during the Festival of Spring.

31 Each year the Jews lay the table for the Feast of the Passover according to traditional prescript. Each object on the table has its symbolic meaning.

32 The interior decoration of the open tent built on the balconies and in the courtyards of Jewish dwellings for the period of the festival 'under the green', known as the Feast of the Tabernacles. It is celebrated as a harvest festival and one of thanksgiving for the escape from Egypt.

33 Like other orthodox Jews, for the period of the eight days of the festival the Prague chief rabbi takes all his meals in the symbolic tent built on his balcony.

34 The tiny altar in the hall of the Poděbrady old people's home, which is used by the inmates for religious services on the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays.

35 Two elderly people from a Jewish old people's home at prayer at the Friday evening service before the Sabbath.

36 A rarity of the Prague ghetto—the tower clock of the old Jewish Town Hall with its Hebrew lettering and hands which move in an anti-clockwise direction. Through the centuries it has remained a symbol of the continuity of Jewish life in Prague.