
Follow this Golem

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Friday, April 27, 2001 -- Prague is a city of striking images. From its fairy-tale architecture to the bizarre Hebrew lettering surrounding a crucifix on the Charles Bridge to the eerie, overcrowded cemetery in the old Jewish Quarter to the distinctive Altneu synagogue with its supernatural tales of the Golem. For the Jewish traveler, Prague represents over 1,000 years of a continuous Jewish presence and a concentration of sights unparalleled in all of Europe.

And the city's location in the heart of Europe means that for more than 1,000 years it has been at the crossroads of history with all the good and bad that implies. Today the capital of the Czech Republic, Prague was for centuries one of the most important centers of Jewish life in Europe. Jews have lived here since the late 10th century and by the end of the 11th century, there was a well-established community living in a neighborhood on the banks of the Moldau (Vltava) near the town square.

In the Middle Ages the Jews of Prague suffered at the hands of the Crusaders just as their brethren did elsewhere in Central and Western Europe.

The Crusades, along with the siege of Prague Castle in 1142, led to the deaths of many Jews and the forced conversion of many others. As has been true at many times in Jewish history, civil rights previously granted were taken away, and parts of the Jewish Quarter, along with the synagogues, were burned to the ground. And as had been true so many other times in their history, the Jews were compelled to live in a ghetto.

Conditions went from bad to worse in 1215 when the edicts of the Church's Fourth

Lateran Council required Jews to wear identifying clothing and placed restrictions on Jewish occupations. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jewish life was at the whim of the clergy and various rulers and landowners.

Massacres were not uncommon. A particularly grim one occurred during Easter in 1389. Accused by the local clergy of desecrating the host, the Jewish community of Prague was set upon by a rampaging mob that murdered some 3,000 Jews - almost the entire Jewish population. The women and children who survived were baptized.

Somehow the Jews of Prague survived and the community grew. In the 15th century, Prague's Hebrew press was noted for its editions of the Passover Haggada.

By the early modern era, Prague became a European cultural center and Jews began to move into society at large as historians, mathematicians, and astronomers. The Jewish population increased dramatically, and more liberal social conditions permitted Jews to own land just outside the ghetto.

One of Prague's most famous Jews was 16th-century Rabbi Judah Loew ben-Bezalel (1525-1609), known by his Hebrew acronym Maharal. A great scholar and teacher, he is said to have created a Golem, a mystical Frankenstein-like clay figure with neither mind nor soul, to protect the Jews of Prague.

The Jewish community would find that it needed that protection.

Although by the early 18th century, Prague boasted one of the world's major Jewish communities, one that constituted a quarter of the city's overall population, expulsion was in the wind. Empress Maria Theresa threw the Jews out in 1745 and they did not return until the beginning of the reign of Josef II more than 30 years later.

Josef II's acceptance of the Jews was such that the Jewish Quarter was named after him and today still bears his name - Josefov. During his reign, the community flourished and Jews were permitted to participate in all aspects of economic and social life.

As it did in much of Europe, emancipation and civil rights came to the Jews of Prague during the 19th century. The ghetto was closed down in 1852 and converted into just another town district. Like their fellow Czechs, Jews became enmeshed in the cultural conflict of the times - the split between those who spoke Czech and those who favored the German cultural sphere. Jews overwhelmingly favored the language and culture of the empire, and as a result, friction between Jews and Czechs increased with the rise of nationalism in the latter decades of the 19th century.

Though organizations designed to move Jews toward Czech culture were established,

many Jews still preferred German. And by this time, Jews were also involved in their own nationalism - Zionism.

In the Holocaust, some two-thirds of Prague's 55,000 Jews perished. At war's end there were about 13,000 Jews left in all of Czechoslovakia, and by the early 1950s many had moved to Israel.

The communist regime was suspicious of Czechoslovakia's few remaining Jews, putting some of them to show trials and persecuting Judaism along with other religious practice. Difficult though that period was, the wave of freedom heralded first by the Prague Spring of 1968 and the eventual demise of the communist government 21 years later would bring a small but definite renaissance to Jewish Prague.

ON JANUARY 1, 1993 Czechoslovakia was consigned to history and Prague became the capital of the new Czech Republic.

Prague's Jewish community today has about 1,000 people and the Jewish Quarter town hall serves as its locus.

Within its historic walls can be found Prague's historic Jewish institutions along with a kindergarten. Most of Prague's Jewish sights are in Josefov, the old ghetto. But one of the oddest sights in town can be found among the 30 statues lining the nearby Charles Bridge.

If you approach the bridge from the Old Town side, the third statue on your right as you walk along the span is of a bronze crucifix with the words Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh Adonai Tzvaot.

If you think it's bizarre to see words from the Jewish Kedusha prayer on a crucifix, think of Elias Backoffen, a Jew who in 1696 was forced to affix the lettering as a punishment for refusing to take off his hat when he walked past the crucifix.

For centuries it has been a source of indignation to Jews and some have even refused to cross the bridge because of it. Now, finally, the statue bears an explanatory plaque.

It is one of history's ironies that the Jewish town of Prague is there at all. During the Nazi occupation, rather than destroy it, the Germans decided to preserve it as a museum to what they planned would soon become an extinct race.

Within what is now the Jewish Museum, the Nazis collected and catalogued all manner of Jewish items taken from all over Europe.

Much of what has physically survived - ritual objects, paintings, drawings, prints, manuscripts, and photographs - remained intact because it was to be part of this museum. When communism fell, the museum became once again the property of the Jewish community.

Make sure to visit the 16th-century Town Hall and the Hebrew-faced clock. Nearby, at the corner of U Radnice and Maiselova, a bust of Franz Kafka marks his birthplace in July 1883. The Kafka Museum, dedicated in 1991, depicts his life along with that of Jewish Prague.

In addition to the main exhibition building, the Jewish Museum comprises the Pinkas, Klausen, Maisel, and Spanish synagogues, the 15th-century Jewish cemetery with its burial society, and the Ceremonial Hall. The Altneuschul, in the same district, still functions as a synagogue.

(Box) Being there

Museums

For information about the Jewish Museum and its synagogues, visit www.jewishmuseum.cz or call 420-2-24-81- 94-56.

Dining

n Jeruzalem 5 Berehova. Tel: 420-2-2481-2001. Inexpensive dairy restaurant specializing in Israeli-style food.

n Casablanca 10 Na Prikope. Tel: 420-2-2423-1501. A 10-minute walk from the Jewish quarter, this restaurant's Israeli-style food is under the supervision of Rabbi Frank from Jerusalem.

n Shalom 18 Maiselova. Reservations through Precious Legacy Tours, Tel: 420-2-232-0398. This inexpensive, community-owned restaurant in the old Jewish Quarter serves simple, central European cuisine meat meals. (Not glatt kosher; open for lunch only).

n King Solomon 8 Siroka. Tel: 420-2-2481-8752. This meat restaurant serves small portions of expensive central European style Jewish food with an emphasis of Czech specialties. They will prepare boxed meals and send them to your hotel.

Note: These four kosher restaurants will all take prepaid bookings for Shabbat.

Accommodation

Hotels in the Old Town near the Jewish Quarter include the expensive Intercontinental (www.interconti.com), the Grand Hotel Bohemia (www.austria-hotels.co.at), and the Pariz (www.hotel-pariz.cz), while more moderately priced accommodations can be found at Ungelt (420-2-2482-8686), the Betlem Club (420-2-2222-1575) and the Hotel Cloister Inn (www.cloister-inn.cz).

Chabad can arrange stays in private apartments with kosher kitchens near the Jewish Quarter.

Arrangements can be made through the Web at: chabadprague@mbox.vol.cz

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