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THE JEWS OF PRAGUE: A PEOPLE ENDURE

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Dear Peter and friends:

"The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect to the Jews: 'You may not live among us as Jews.' The secular rulers who followed them from the late Middle Ages then decided: 'You may not live among us,' and the Nazis finally decreed: 'You may not live.'"

-Raul Hilberg, historian, "Shoah"

Josefov, sometimes called "Jews' Town," is one of the top tourist attractions of Prague. Busloads tour its Old-New Synagogue, the oldest continuously operating synagogue in Europe, and the Old Jewish Cemetery. François Mitterrand and Margaret Thatcher visited the cemetery recently to examine graves dating back to the 15th century.

In the former ceremonial hall at the entrance to the cemetery is a permanent exhibit of 4,000 children's drawings from Terezín, the concentration camp-ghetto 60 kilometers north of Prague that was used as a temporary stop for Jews on their way to Auschwitz and other death camps.

The synagogue, cemetery and ceremonial hall are parts of the State Jewish Museum in Prague, which also features extensive collections of manuscripts, textiles, and silver and other religious objects.

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To me, the museum and its collections always seemed more like an eerie, silent memorial to a people that didn't live here anymore than a museum of a culture that builds on its centuries-old tradition and lives on.

While walking through Josefov, I tried to imagine what it looked like when it was a crowded ghetto, with schools, an infirmary and public baths. It was a separate quarter in Prague by the 13th century and grew to hold as many as 700 people by the 17th century. The ghetto was abolished in the 1850s, and Jews then could settle anywhere. They renamed the area Josephstadt (Josefov), in honor of the enlightened monarch of the preceding century whose reforms included religious tolerance.

I also tried to imagine life in Prague earlier in this century, when Albert Einstein taught here, Franz Kafka wrote here, and the Jewish population numbered in the thousands.

I set out to find out something about the state of Jewish life in Prague today. September seemed like a good time - Sept. 19 marked the start of the Jewish New Year 5751, and I could attend New Year's services at the Old-New Synagogue. The synagogue this year marks its 700th anniversary.

The history of the Prague Jewish community dates back as far as 907, but no comprehensive history has been written about it here. I gathered bits and pieces from various volumes. What I found was a sad study of people subjected to discrimination and harsh living conditions in centuries past, then occupation and murder by the Nazis during World War II. Those who survived then lived in a secular society, the scope of their religious activity controlled by the Communists.

I did find some signs of life. I met Jews who have managed to preserve some of their history and culture, and others who are discovering it for the first time today.

First, some statistics I obtained from the Prague Jewish Community: Before World War II, about 360,000 Jews lived in Czechoslovakia. A total of 45,000 of those lived in Prague. There were more than 150 organized Jewish communities.

After the war 40,000 Jews remained in all of Czechoslovakia. Two out of three European Jews died in World War II. Among them were more than 77,000 from Bohemia and Moravia. (Their names were written onto a wall of the Pinkas Synagogue in Josefov in 1960, but the memorial was destroyed by moisture eight years later and building has been closed and under repair ever since.)

The number of Jews in Czechoslovakia continued dropping with emigration during the 1950s and 1960s. Today there are only a handful of Jewish communities, and most cannot even come up with a minyan - 10 men needed to hold public prayer. Between 3,000 and 3,500 people are registered as Jews with the Jewish Community. About 1,000 of those are in the Prague Jewish Community, which



A gravestone from the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague. Because of the shortage of space, graves were stacked on top of one another and in some spots are nine layers deep.

includes central, northern and southern Bohemia. It is estimated that the actual number of Jews is two times as large as the number of registered, according to Rabbi Daniel Mayer.

Mayer was the rabbi for Bohemia and Moravia from June 1984 until this July. He lost his job when he admitted he was an informant for the state secret police. This was discovered during routine



The Old Jewish Cemetery was founded in the 15th century and was used until 1787. Many gravestones have disintegrated or sunk into the ground. The ones remaining lean every which way under the elder trees.

candidate questioning when Mayer ran for a seat in Parliament this spring.

He still works out of his office in the Prague Jewish Community headquarters, where he and his wife teach Hebrew and religion to children. He told me he never passed on any information that hurt anyone. Many Community members say they realize this is a complicated issue - you could not be in any high-level function under the Communist government without cooperating with the state police. They also note that Mayer has done a lot for the Community.

Mayer says the biggest difference in the Community since the Velvet Revolution and the advent of democracy is, "We don't have to ask anyone anything, and we don't have to be afraid."

His biggest concern today is how to increase young people's interest in Jewish life and religion. He says 85 percent of the

Community's members are 60 or older.

A few Community members have begun organizing children's Seders during Passover. Children also are involved in a choir, as well as a theater group organized by 28-year-old actress Vida Neuwirthová.

I met with Neuwirthová in her spacious, high-ceilinged apartment a few yards off Wenceslaus Square. She is Jewish but didn't know it until she was 15, when her father told her it was time to show her around the Jewish Community.

"I was glad I knew, and I then began familiarizing myself with it," she said. Today, she does not consider herself religious but is interested in the cultural and historic aspects of Judaism.

She started her children's theater after she became active in the Jewish Community six or seven years ago and noticed it had few activities for youngsters. She put on a performance with puppets, then decided to use the children to act out parts in biblical stories.

She directs and sews the costumes and writes the scripts, which under the Communists had to be approved by the Ministry of the Interior.

I asked her whether she's had any trouble because of her religion. She said no - "They've only had me in for questioning twice." When I expressed surprise at the "only," she explained that questioning by the secret police was a normal occurrence for members of the Jewish Community.

With the afternoon sun streaming into the windows, she held her chubby 4-month-old, Matyáš, and walked back and forth in her living room, matter-of-factly explaining the interrogation techniques.

I asked whether she'd been scared. She said she was shaking when she left and went for coffee and a shot of liquor with a friend, then broke down and cried when she told the rabbi about the interview. But she said one had to live with such things - otherwise you give up and get nothing at all done.

Neuwirthová's theater group is to be featured in a Czech television documentary about the Prague Jewish Community, and she is up for part in an upcoming film about Franz Kafka, which also is to feature scenes from the Community. She also is involved with the Community's choir, which she says before the Revolution existed as "half-secret and half-legal."

Neuwirthová classifies most of Prague's Jews as secular and sees no real resurgence of religious activity in the next few years.

"The majority of people in fact have never been to the Community or synagogue and have no interest in it."

She did say that maybe younger people will discover in themselves a religious feeling now that they can learn more about Judaism and even travel to Israel. During the Communist years visas to Israel were virtually unheard of, especially for young people. The Jewish Community took a group of youngsters to Israel this summer for the first such visit in 22 years.

Neuwirthová said she is not raising her 3-year-old son, David, to be Jewish, because "I don't want him to be different from the other kids." She said she wouldn't mind though if he grew up to be religious. "I'd be rather glad, actually," she said, although she couldn't say the same for her non-Jewish husband.

Another woman I met, a professional interpreter, said she has advised her 12-year-old son not to tell his classmates that he's Jewish. Like Neuwirthová, she doesn't want her son to have trouble in school.

Neuwirthová knows of only a couple of Orthodox Jewish families in Prague, who strictly observe traditions such as a kosher kitchen and no motorized travel on the Sabbath.

"And then there are those who go to synagogue on Fridays or holidays, but they go there by tram."

Rabbi Mayer estimates that of the 1,000 registered Jews in the Prague Jewish Community, 300 to 400 consider themselves religious. Others, particularly those who can recall life before World War II and the subsequent secularization under Communism, may remember a grandmother who would light Sabbath candles or even a few words of Hebrew they learned as children. But mostly Jews here grew up having Christmas trees and Easter eggs. When they visit the State Jewish Museum, they don't know what a Torah is, or an embroidered matzo cover for Passover.

On Saturdays, 15-16 men come to each of Prague's two synagogues for regular services, Mayer said. The synagogues are crowded during holidays, but most of those people are visiting tourists, he said.

Indeed, that was the case on Rosh Hashana. The Old-New Synagogue is Orthodox, which means the women sit in a separate section. Here it meant a separate room, with only narrow slits in the white stone walls that acted as windows into the main prayer area. One had to sit next to the window openings, each 2 to 3 feet wide and 3 feet above the wooden floor, to hear the services.

I felt honored to be in such a historic place. I strained to hear the echoes of the melodic Hebrew prayers. But most of the women in the room chatted in Yiddish or Hebrew throughout the services. Tourists even came in and snapped pictures of us, and the services were surprisingly brief.

Afterward, I found out that most of the men - particularly the

young men - had been visitors. My source was a man from Larchmont, N.Y., who'd sat next to someone from Costa Rica.

The issue of religiousness is a complex one. But clearly it is difficult to feel religious when one does not even understand the basics of one's religion.

The State Jewish Museum in Prague should be one source for finding one's Jewish roots. It was founded in 1906, when a group of Prague residents wanted to preserve items from synagogues being razed as Josefov was being rebuilt. When the Nazis took over Czechoslovakia they made plans to form a central Jewish museum when they closed all synagogues and Jewish religious communities. Confiscated items from all over Czechoslovakia and other countries were sent to Prague.

"It was in big piles," said Bedřich Nosek, chief curator of the State Jewish Museum. "Everything was there. Besides religious objects and religious art there were of course paintings from homes, furniture, violins, carpets, and so on."

Jewish prisoners sorted and repaired the items, which were then available at low cost or free to arriving German military personnel, Nosek said. Jews saw the plans for the museum as a sign that perhaps the Germans really cared about them, Nosek said, while it really was to be a "Museum of an Extinct Race" and a way to keep Czechoslovak Jews calm while preparing for the "Final Solution."

"The museum in my opinion was to serve as one of the, among other things, deceitful maneuvers of the Germans," Nosek said. "Just before the end of the war the majority of the museum staff was sent East by special transport, and there they were liquidated."

The confiscated items, including more than 30,000 art objects, remain in storage in several locations. A tall pile of beach blanket-sized Torah covers in transit was taking up most of the space in Nosek's office when I visited him.

A picture of Czechoslovak President Václav Havel dangled from a paper clip on the wall behind Nosek's desk, under a lovely old oil painting of a Jewish elder.

After the war, in 1949, the Jewish Communities' ruling council gave the museum to the state, because among other things it could not afford to fix it up and run it, Nosek said. Subsequent exhibits were "de-religionized." The emphasis was on assimilation of the Jews, seeing them as part of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and not a separate, Zionistic group.

The museum still sells an informational brochure, available in several languages, that says "the history of the development of Jewish religious communities is understood as the development of religious groups forming an integral part of the population of the Czech Lands and not as the history of the development of

members of the so-called 'Jewish nation of the world' artificially construed by the ideologists of Zionism."

It also says Czechoslovak Jews are "guaranteed all rights and conditions for the practice of their religion and play a full part in the building-up of a socialist society in Czechoslovakia," and that the museum's monuments will be preserved "for future generations in a new socialist society to which manifestations of racism and national chauvinism will continue to be entirely foreign."

The actual "rights and conditions" were of course a different story. For example, the museum could talk about Communists active in the Terezin concentration camp during the war, Nosek said. "But there was also a much stronger Zionist group that substantially influenced life there and tried namely to save the younger generation because they thought it would continue in Jewish life and part could go on to build Palestine, Israel. That wasn't talked about."

A literature exhibit had to be canceled because it mentioned the era when Tomáš Masaryk - in an unpopular move that haunted him even as he became Czechoslovakia's first president in 1918 - came to the aid of Leopold Hilsner, a Jewish cobbler unjustly sentenced to death for the ritual murder of a young woman. Masaryk could not be talked about at a time when history classes ignored Czechoslovakia's democratic First Republic and focused on life after the Communists gained power in 1948.

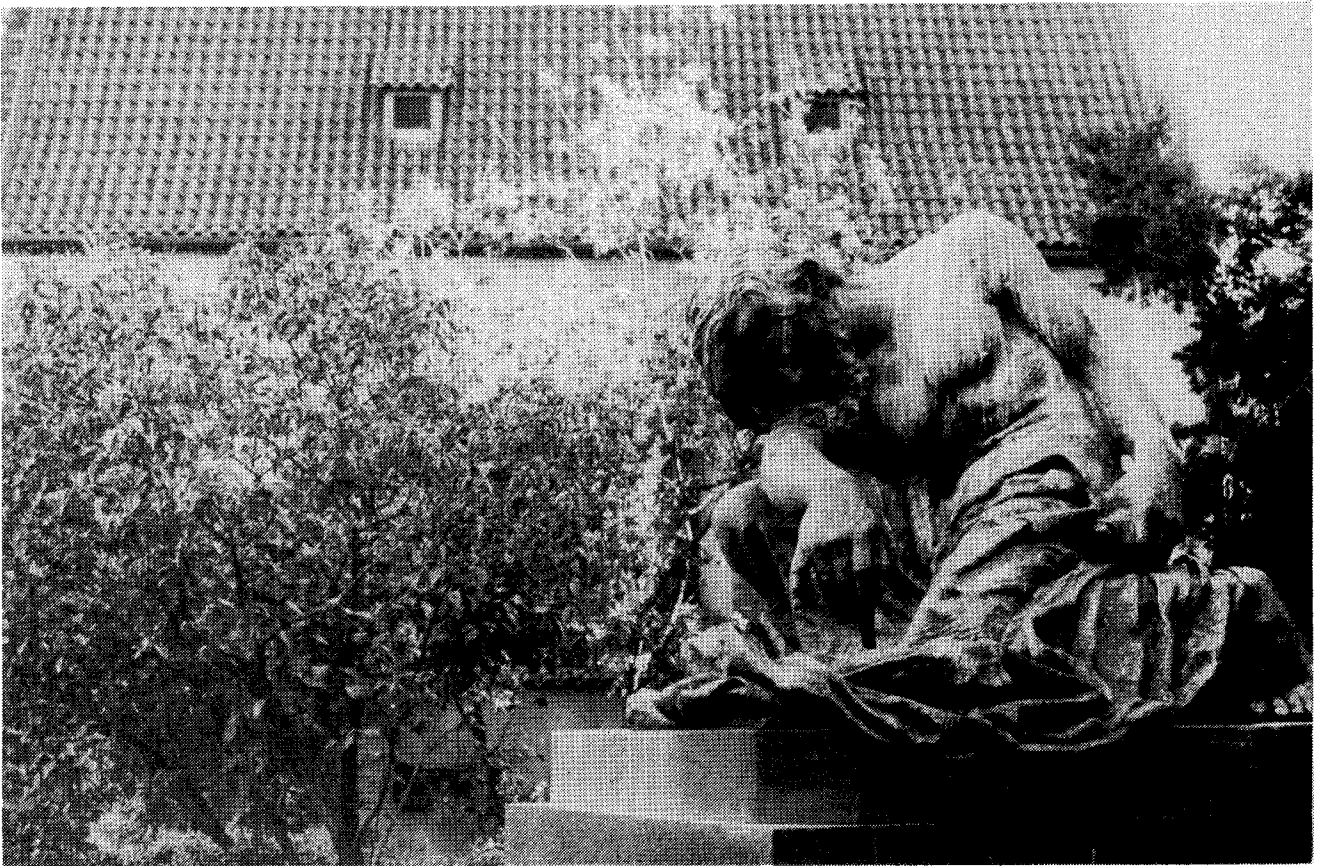
When asked how he managed to work with such limitations, Nosek said the museum "worked within the realm of possibilities. I personally defend the view that it's important to take advantage of a situation and do what you can within the realm of possibilities."

He said even such compromise brought its advantages, such as the creation of high-quality catalogs for the exhibits that were allowed, and contacts and occasional travel to conferences abroad.

Museum staff was able to attend two congresses of Brit Ivrit Olamit, a Jerusalem-based organization for the support of the Hebrew language and literature - in 1978 in Amsterdam and 1980 in Warsaw (the first time for such a gathering in a Communist country.) Nosek kept up the contacts and hopes the 1992 congress will be in Prague.

Other goals include establishing more professional contacts and developing local experts in the Hebrew language, which he said for years was not taught at the university level here. The museum also is aiming for close working relationships with museum experts on Jewish art and culture, and exhibition and study exchanges.

Nosek also is involved in the new Society for Jewish Culture,



A statue of Moses, by František Bílek, in the garden outside the Old-New Synagogue.

which was founded in April. Its main goals are to familiarize the "widest-possible circle of people" with Jewish culture and traditions. "It's a way to prevent certain latent anti-semitism" in people who know nothing about Judaism, Nosek said. Activities will include exhibitions, lectures and concerts. A second goal for the Society is to provide an outlet for political and cultural activity among Jews who are not religious and have stayed away from the Prague Jewish Community and its more religious focus.

The State Jewish Museum receives state funding, and Nosek expects it to continue to do so. The Prague Jewish Community also receives state money. Both organizations are confident that under the new, democratic government, they can run their own affairs. Previously, all Community events had to be government-approved, and government representatives attended all meetings.

Both the museum and the Jewish Community now play host to a steady stream of foreign visitors, many offering advice, money or other support.

Nosek says "public relations" is just about all he has time for these days. In the hour I spent with him he took a phone call in Russian and greeted visitors speaking English and Hebrew.

Karel Wasserman, president of the Prague Jewish Community since May, says his main goals for the next year are to make money for the Community by opening galleries and other shops in Josefov in the area near the cemetery; recovering 30 pieces of property, mostly houses, that the state nationalized in the 1950s; and saving the 400 cemeteries in northern, central and southern Bohemia in the Community's care.

Under Wasserman, the kosher restaurant in the Jewish Community's headquarters building has been spruced up and is now open for lunch and dinner. Wasserman says it's quite profitable.

"The restaurant sustains us," he said, although some Community members miss the way it was - shabby but "theirs."

The cemeteries are the most critical problem, he said, and state money doesn't even come close to covering the costs of their renovation and upkeep.

He says he hopes "good Christians" will become more interested in Jewish cemeteries and will want to help maintain them. When I ask whether on the contrary, there may be less interest and fewer "good Christians" if hard economic times lead to a resurgence of anti-semitism (already noticeable in Slovakia), he bristles and says anti-semitism in Bohemia is no different than it is in the United States.

But unlike Americans, Czechoslovaks had the Holocaust in their back yard.

According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, 150,000 Jews passed through Terezin. Thirty-three thousand of them died of hunger or disease in the ghetto. Ninety-thousand were transported to Auschwitz.

In the State Jewish Museum's exhibit of children's art from Terezin, each drawing has the name, age and fate of the artist written on it. Some children drew the life they saw in the camp-ghetto. Others drew their memories or their dreams - flowers, mountains, smiling faces. Every picture I saw was marked with that deadly word, "Auschwitz."

Anti-semitism and its worst consequences - including the small number of Jews in Eastern Europe today - should hit close to home here. That is why I am horrified when I see even a handful of Slovak extremists chanting anti-semitic slogans during nationalistic demonstrations. And I am baffled how a plaque commemorating Josef Tiso, president of the fascist Slovak Republic who after World War was executed for his war crimes, could be unveiled in Slovakia. That happened during the summer. The plaque was taken down after a wave of protests.

Mayer said one "advantage" of living in a totalitarian state had been the absence of overt anti-semitism, because of a certain fear of what the world would think.

"Now there's democracy, now everyone can hurl insults. There's a certain disadvantage in that. On the other hand, there's an advantage to knowing what's inside those people."

All the best,



Dagmar

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