

Jewish Community in the Czech Republic after 1989

Let me begin by saying that I am not a researcher in the field I am going to talk about. Born in 1946, I remember quite a lot and my presentation is a personal memory rather than a systematic analysis of events in the Czech Jewish community before or after 1989.

As far as my memory can reach, I must say that I have always been surrounded by people who had a number tattooed on their left forearm. It was only when I started going to school that I realized that not everyone wears this kind of decoration. Soon I also learned that some things can only be discussed at home. I don't mean politics but rather subjects such as memories of relatives during and prior to their time in Terezin, names of people who shared the same concentration camp or names of family members who did not come back.

It was probably this slow and very painful overcoming of war experiences which constituted a dominant feature of the Jewish community at the time. Nevertheless, it was necessary to get on with life again. Those who returned started their own new families and had children, while the trauma was forced into the background. I am aware, however, that the trauma never really disappeared but emerged again at a time when that generation of people started retiring; they stopped working and, suddenly, the thing they had been trying to forget, came back. I remember an aunt of mine who underwent a surgical procedure when she was roughly 80 years old and spent the last years of her life at a mental clinic in Bohnice; her troubled mind made her believe that she was actually in Auschwitz. The rather appalling conditions at the clinic only helped to reinforce the idea.

Although approximately 16 thousand Jews returned from concentration camps, the Communist coup in 1948, the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia as well as an immense despair would gradually drive Jewish families to seek a new home abroad. Those who stayed behind mostly kept their Jewishness secret. This was to avoid potential problems at work, threats and other complications. After retiring, my mother started working for the Council of Jewish Communities in the building of the Prague Jewish Community where I sometimes visited her. After some time, a colleague of mine informed me that the State Security (StB) had asked about me. A mere visit of the Jewish Council was suspicious and potentially dangerous. The Secret police made a lot of effort to keep track of everything that was going on here. Some employees were being forced to cooperate, some indeed did cooperate with the State Security.

The regime practiced a repressive approach to all churches while pretending that religious freedom was intact. Jews were tolerated at least until they die out. While services

and other events such as a Hanukkah party were allowed, youth education in Judaism was banned. In the mid-1960s I attended the drama club run by the Prague Jewish Community and I can still recall a lot of plays that we staged. The course was led by Ms. Dufková who, just like my parents and the parents of all the other child actors, went through Terezin and wore a number tattoo from Auschwitz. She also had a first-hand experience with the Terezin theatre and she used it in our own rehearsals. Of course, every single play had to be approved by an appropriate Church Secretary at the Ministry of Culture. Oddly enough, as far as I can remember, there was no problem with plays staged as part of our celebrations during religious holidays. They had an issue with our adaptation of short stories by Vojtěch Rakous that offered a humorous look at the life of Jews in the Czech countryside and their co-existence with non-Jewish neighbours. The adaptation had to wait several years before Dr. Iltis, the then Secretary of the Prague Jewish Community, was able to persuade the Church Secretary to lift the ban.

Both implicit and open repression along with the education ban and a gradually growing number of emigrés caused that the Jewish community was diminishing rather than growing as was the case in free parts of the world. Thus, after 1989, following the enrollment of additional members who did not go public with their faith earlier, Jewish Communities in the entire country had approximately 3 thousand members. The destruction caused by Hitler and the Nazis was nearly completed by the Communist regime.

Following the political changes in 1989, new people were elected into the Prague Jewish Community and the Council of Jewish Communities. Also, new tasks were set out that involved social care for former concentration camp prisoners and a further development of the Jewish community. Founded at the time, the Terezin Initiative brought together former prisoners of the Terezin Ghetto with the main aim to restore standard conditions at the Terezin Memorial. The role of the Prague Jewish Community and the Federation of Jewish Communities (the supervising organization changed its name as early as 1990) proved indispensable in this matter, too. Parallel to these developments, various surveys took place in order to gather all necessary documents for the restitution of Jewish property. In 1991, the Parliament passed the Act on Out-of-Court Rehabilitations that allowed to return state-owned property that had been nationalized by the Communist regime. The Prague Jewish Community received its first property of this kind. Neglected Jewish sites and religious buildings, especially cemeteries, were included to be among the big tasks for the future.

New organizations and associations were founded. Among the first was the Czechoslovak Union of Jewish Youth or the Czech branch of WIZO. The Prague Jewish

Community launched a number of new clubs, dedicated to chess, Israeli dance and many other activities. Under the supervision of Jiří Daniček, the former “Newsletter of the Council of Jewish Communities“ was replaced by the more current monthly “Rosh Chodesh“; the “Sefer” publishing house also emerged during that time. Above all, religious life was being restored. Thanks to funding from the Prague Jewish Community, after a long time Prague got its own Jewish ritual bath – mikvah. With the help of Ronald Lauder, a Jewish kindergarten was opened in 1994. In 1998, a Jewish primary school was also established which was later extended to include a secondary school.

In 1992, the Prague Jewish Community bought a building on Janovského street that was adapted as a retirement home. The renovation was finished a year later and in 1994 it opened its doors to members of the Community. Matana, a private point-stock company, was also founded in 1992 with the aim of maintaining the property of the Prague Jewish Community. After Rabbi Daniel Mayer stepped down in 1990, the post of Prague's chief rabbi was not filled until 1992 with the naming of Karol Efraim Sidon. That same year negotiations were launched over the compensation for Czech Jews. At the end of the year, the management of the Terezin Memorial also decided to establish a new educational department that set out to disseminate knowledge and raise awareness about Terezin and all other prison facilities, including the underground plant (code name “the Richard mine”) and concentration camp in Litoměřice. The department started its activities in 1993. Despite its humble development in its early days, it is currently the largest museum department with a high renown that generates a lot of interest mainly among teachers and educators.

In 1993 the Federation of Jewish Communities turned to the Parliament of the Czech Republic to consider a bill that would enable return of property to individual Jewish Communities, including the then state-run Jewish Museum. Although the Parliament rejected the bill, thanks to the persistent pressure from the Federation of Jewish Communities and the state's willingness to resolve the issue of Jewish restitutions, another bill was passed in April 1994 that set a new deadline for restitution claims for state-owned property that had been expropriated due to racial persecution. It was a partial but, nonetheless, a considerable achievement of the Jewish community that strove to reach a just solution in the issue of confiscated property. The government also recommended that municipalities and other non-state entities return Jewish property voluntarily, which indeed took place in many cases.

Among the most significant restitutions was the return of the State Jewish Museum's collections to the Federation of Jewish Communities which, in cooperation with the Prague Jewish Community and the Ministry of Culture, co-founded the non-governmental

organization Jewish Museum in Prague. The Federation provided the Museum with its newly acquired collections that were gradually displayed; the Prague Jewish Community then supplied buildings that were restituted from the City of Prague. Pavel Tigrid, the then Minister of Culture, played an important part in these developments. Dr. Leo Pavlát became the Museum's Managing Director. Since the beginning of its existence, the Museum has played a significant role in educating the public about Jewish history and present. The scope of its activities is extraordinary and the impact of its efforts is nearly priceless.

The Jewish Museum works on the gradual renovation of synagogues in the former ghetto, always offering new exhibits that educate the public about the religious life of Jews, highlight specific holidays and display collections from the Holocaust, especially children's drawings from Terezin. The Old Testament in Art, a festival that included 60 different cultural events, was a resounding success, largely owed to the efforts of the Museum as well as the Embassy of Israel. Ambassador Moshe Yegar was even involved in one of the events. In 1996, the Museum founded the Education and Culture Centre, which joined forces with the educational department of the Terezin Memorial to promote Holocaust education and awareness. Around the same time, President Václav Havel initiated the creation of the Holocaust Phenomenon Project, a task group that prepares a study about educational activities related to World War II. In 1999, the group also organized an international scientific conference that promoted an active approach in the field of education as well as in research and Holocaust awareness. It was again President Václav Havel who led the Czech delegation at the Stockholm Forum and agreed to join the organization that was being formed at the time, with the Czech Republic actually joining a year later

The issue of individual compensation for victims of Nazi persecution still remains unresolved. The Federation firmly demands redress in this matter; however, negotiations are very slow and the Federation's protests find little response both at home and abroad. The situation seems to have taken a step forward only when the Federation representatives refused to take part in the ceremonial signing of the Czech-German Declaration. Among the first initiatives of the new Czech-German Fund for the Future was the so-called humanitarian gesture whereby former concentration camp prisoners receive a monthly payment based on the duration of their imprisonment. Later, pensions also started being paid from the Claims Conference funds. The Czech-German Fund also initiated compensation for slave and forced labour.

In January 1999, the Government and the Federation of Jewish Communities established the Joint Commission for Mitigating Some of the Injustices Caused to Holocaust Victims. Headed by Vice Prime Minister Pavel Rychetský, it consisted of representatives of the Czech State and the Federation that invited other foreign participants, such as the American Jewish Committee and the WJRO. In its four years of existence the Commission submitted legislation, governmental acts, rulings and other proposals that tried to rectify some of the injustices caused during World War II and deepened in the decades of Communism which followed. The commission managed to generate some specific results, too, e.g., it published a report on Nazi-looted Jewish gold and jewellery, initiated the Act No. 212/2000 Coll. which enabled to claim agricultural land, Jewish communal real estate and art works owned by state institutions. For a group of claimants without Czech citizenship, the Commission prepared an extra-legislative solution. Namely, the Government transferred CZK 300 mil. into a Foundation established by the Federation. The “Holocaust Victims Foundation” assembled claims from the original owners or the heirs of people who were not able to claim their property or did not succeed due to formal errors. The Foundation paid out CZK 100 mil. to approx. 500 claimants. The rest goes to the renovation of Jewish monuments, mostly cemeteries, and to other social, educational and cultural projects. Though there are several items on the Jewish property restitution agenda that still remain to be resolved, the long-term process of property-return has been successful as it provided a basis for the Czech Jewish Communities to launch a fresh development of Jewish life in the country.