A Trip to the Czech Republic: Visit Restored, Renovated, and/or Preserved Jewish Monuments throughout the Country

Note: This article, edited by the author, includes in lieu of the slides, a little more background on specific communities than was presented in the oral presentation. Information is based upon notes taken on tour with our local guide and from pamphlets.

Usually I am not too good about reading listservs and I let my emails accumulate. For some reason in January of 2017 I decided that I had let my listservs go unread for too long. As luck would have it, I opened the hasafran listserv to discover Etta Gold's email dated, January 19th, with the message “Jewish Heritage Trip to Prague”. This started my amazing 18-day tour in June, 2017, to view reconstructed, restored and preserved Jewish monuments throughout the Czech Republic.

Barbara Weitz, a retired professor from Florida Atlantic University, who was the Director of the Prague Study Abroad Program, organized this tour of the Czech 10 Star Project. The 10 Star project is a centrally coordinated and managed network of 10 regional cultural and educational centers of Jewish culture, showcasing the unique cultural heritage of the Jews in the Czech Republic.

The Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic received a grant of approximately €11 million from the EU, plus further funding from the Czech Culture Ministry. This enabled restoration of fifteen important historical buildings in ten towns. The project is a joint venture between the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic and the local community. Local townspeople attend to the building, open it to the public as a historical site, and use the space for displays, lectures, concerts, etc.

Before I start the tour, here is some background about the Czech Republic. It is a secular country. Some 200 synagogues are preserved in the Czech Republic today; however, synagogues over the years have been altered to serve different purposes. During the war some of the synagogues served as warehouses. Today half of Czech's Jews live in Prague. Our Czech guide said there are 10 active Jewish communities today.

On our tour we visited nine towns. In this talk I present a snapshot of the sites and towns we visited. With the map accompanying this article you can follow my trip through the
Czech Republic. The 10 star website, [http://10hvezd.cz/en/](http://10hvezd.cz/en/), has an excellent two-minute video describing the project. On the webpage, click the heading “About Reconstruction and Restoration”. Also on the website are videos about the projects in each town. Jewish life in these towns ended in the middle of the 20th century with WW II and the Nazis.

We had a local guide, David Kraus, who is a historian by education. By the 16th century, David's ancestors already were living in Prague’s famous Jewish Quarter. His father Tomas Kraus, is the Executive Director of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic. A link to our local tour guide's website is [http://www.kosherxtours.com/jewel-of-central-europe](http://www.kosherxtours.com/jewel-of-central-europe). This site not only gives information about his tours, but general and Jewish historical information about different regions of the Czech Republic.

**Brandýs nad Labem**

The first town visited was Brandýs nad Labem. (Wikipedia, population 18,134) Nad labem means on the Elba River. The town is located 15 miles northeast of Prague.

The ancestors of Justice Louis D. Brandeis come from here. In 1829 Jews in Brandý nad Labem were employed in 3 occupations:
1) Jobs connected to the Jewish community: schochet, etc.
2) Money lenders
3) Self employed, craftsman (leather tanners/potash makers/ peddlers)

Typical to a Czech town is a center square. Jews could not live by the square. The synagogue, a short walk from the town square, is a rectangular building that dominates the remnants of a small former ghetto area.

The synagogue was built in 1829, although the first mention of a synagogue is 1559. It houses a main hall, a community center with teacher's quarter, a winter prayer room, which we would call a chapel, a classroom, and a kitchen. There is a separate women's entrance and stairway leading to a double women's gallery.

The cemetery is located a short walk from the synagogue. It contains some of the oldest gravestones in the country still in their original positions. The oldest tombstone dates from 1572. There is empty land in the cemetery for burial because after WWII there were no Jews to bury in the cemetery. Open land in Jewish cemeteries is common in small towns throughout the Czech Republic.
Our second stop was Jičín (Wikipedia, population 16,426). Jičín is approximately 50 miles northeast of Prague. The town was founded circa 1300. We entered the old town through a Renaissance structure, built between 1568 and 1578. It served as part of the town's fortification. The old part of Jičín has maintained its original square layout. Dating from the Middle Ages, lovely pastel colored buildings surround the square, and form an arcade of shops. Jičín differed from other towns in that there was no ghetto. Jewish buildings were numbered with Roman numerals as opposed to other buildings which bore Arabic numerals.

The synagogue is a short walk from the main square. The synagogue is a plain structure. There is a Jewish star at the top of the building. The synagogue was originally built in the late 18th century and then rebuilt after the fire in 1840. The synagogue had been used as a warehouse. Some interior decoration, including the ark survived. The synagogue features a baroque style altar. The interior walls of the synagogue are a lovely pastel blue color.

In 1872 the community purchased a two-story building that served as a Jewish school. Today the building houses exhibits on the two floors. One of the permanent exhibits is: “Jewish Learning in the Czech Lands.”

Each of the 10 star sites house two exhibits, one is on the Jews of the region, the second is about a broader aspect of Judaism. The townspeople have local displays at each site.

Březnice

Number 3 on your map is Březnice (Wikipedia, population 3,700), located approximately 50 miles southwest of Prague. Jews settled here in the 15th century. It was not until the 1726 translocation decree that the Jews are moved into a ghetto.

From the town's main square one enters a gate marked by a Jewish star embedded in the sidewalk. A narrow street leads to the ghetto.

The Březnice Jewish quarter is an extremely well-defined area. Go to the website, en.mapy.cz, Search for Lokšany, Březnice, to view the layout of the ghetto. Click panorama to tour the ghetto. Click the synagogue for a photo of the building. Of the thirty houses that were in the ghetto, twenty-two remain today.
The synagogue, which is from the 18\textsuperscript{th}/19\textsuperscript{th} century, is cube-shaped, and stands in the middle of the square. It has a peaked red tile roof. In 1821 the synagogue was renovated in the Neoclassical Style. Additional changes were made in 1874 and the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Upstairs was a Jewish school only for boys. The ground floor had a shamash quarter.

Úštěk

Úštěk (Wikipedia, population under 2,700) is the fourth town that we visited. It is approximately 45 miles north of Prague and about 12 miles from Terezín or Theresienstadt which we did tour.

Jews were in Úštěk in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century. The Jewish community reached its peak in 1893, with 192 Jews in the surrounding towns. Jews were primarily engaged in the sale of hops (Hops are the flowers used primarily as a flavoring stability agent in beer.) Benjamin Schwartz and Sons were hop merchants who had branches in Úštěk, and also on Broadway in New York City.

Of the buildings renovated or reconstructed by the 10 Star project, the Úštěk synagogue was the most endangered. The interior furnishing was destroyed during the war; however, the building survived the war, only to deteriorate later. The roof had collapsed and the synagogue had been slated for demolition.

The synagogue dates from the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Unique to this synagogue are the following:

1) The synagogue is built on a steep slope and stands on a rock ledge. (It is definitely not the best land to place a building).
2) The synagogue housed a classroom (cheder) and teacher's quarter in the basement. One reaches the cheder and teacher's quarter by the steps at the side of the synagogue. The classroom and teacher's quarter have been replicated to the period.

Úštěk Creek runs in back of the synagogue at the bottom of the
slope. The creek was used by the congregation as a mikveh. A yellow building to the right of the synagogue was a yeshiva and included quarters for the rabbi.

**Nová Cerekev**

Next we traveled to a small market town called Nová Cerekev, located about 56 -75 miles southeast of Prague (Wikipedia, population 1,100).

This town was controlled by the nobility. In the 16th century the nobility welcomed the Jews who brought their skills. Jews rented liquor distilleries and ran inns in the surrounding region. The Jewish population reached its height in the middle of the 19th century. One hundred sixty individuals (thirty families) represented 13% of the town's population.

The two prominent buildings in this town are the church and the synagogue. Unusual to this town is that the synagogue, built in 1855, is higher than the church and dominates the landscape. The synagogue has a fortress-like tower and clock. The architecture is Neo-Romanesque with Oriental or Babylonian-Assyrian features. The interior was completely demolished except for the tall wooden ark with Hebrew inscriptions and the wooden tablets with the 10 commandments.

In the synagogue are a stencil of Hebrew letters, and flyers about Jews, the Hebrew alphabet, and common Hebrew phrases, showing Czech pronunciations and meanings. The flyers are provided courtesy of the local Czech region.

**Polná**

Our sixth town is Polná (Wikipedia, population approximately 5,000) which is located about 80 miles southeast of Prague. The Jewish ghetto, located southeast of the town's main square, feels cut off from the rest of the town. One enters the ghetto through narrow alleyways. The ghetto has survived mainly intact. The synagogue, a vaulted building of stone and brick, was built by the local nobility in 1684.

No pogroms happened in Polná, but Polná is famous for the 1899 Blood Libel Case. The trial was held in the town of Kutna Hora which is marked on the attached map. The case was known as the Hilsner Affair.
Leopold Hilsner, a 22 year old Jewish shoemaker, was arrested when a 19 year old seamstress was found murdered outside the village just before Easter. Hilsner was accused of murdering her with the complicity of the Polná Jewish community to use her blood to make Passover matzo. The trial was rife with anti-Semitic rhetoric. One can compare this to the Dreyfus Affair, which took place in France from 1894 to 1906.

Citing technical error in the trial, Tomas G. Masaryk, who later becomes first president of Czechoslovakia, wrote an eloquent appeal for the verdict to be reversed on legal grounds. Hilsner was condemned to death. Later the sentence was commuted to life in prison. In 1916 Hilsner received amnesty.

Mikulov

Number seven on the map is Mikulov (Wikipedia, population 7,386) which is also known by the German name, Nikolsburg. It borders Austria, and is about 154 miles from Prague and approximately 50 miles from Vienna.

The Jewish quarter was built along the western slope of Mikulov's castle which is adjacent to the main square. There were 370 houses in ghetto. Ninety houses are left today. 1369 is the first mention of a Jewish community. In 1421 the Jews of Lower Austria and Vienna were expelled and crossed the border. Jews were active in the wine trade, transport, and commerce. Until the mid-19th century, the local community was the second largest Jewish community after Prague. Yehudah Loew ben Betzalel, who is associated with the Golem, lived in Mikulov when he served as the chief rabbi of Moravia.

Mikulov had twelve synagogues. Only one survives. It was built in 1555. It is a massive, stone, fortress-like synagogue. The Jewish community was placed under the jurisdiction of the manor. In conflicts with other inhabitants, Jews received court protection. The synagogue may have Italian influences with its Baroque style. The exterior is plain with an interior of richly decorated stucco relief. The central layout of the synagogue is based on the Polish style. A set of four cupolas form an arch on a four pillared column in the center area. Seating for congregants is around the sides of the synagogue. The synagogue with its four pillared column is the only one of its kind in the Czech Republic.
Mikulov has an art gallery which is located on the ground floor of a former Jewish school (cheder) and is owned by a Jewish lady. When our group was in Mikulov, there happened to be a gallery opening. A klezmer group performed. A Czech group of dancers from another town performed Czech and Israeli dances. Residents of the town plus locals from the surrounding areas came for this event.

A restaurant in a hotel in Mikulov serves Jewish cuisine. There is a sign on an outside wall to the street in Czech which reads: “Come to us to taste some Jewish specialities.” In the same hotel there is a mikveh downstairs and a pub named Golem Pub.

**Boskovice**

From Mikulov we traveled north to Boskovice (Wikipedia, population 11,504). Boskovice is 108 miles southeast of Prague. This town is number 8 on your map.

Jews were forced to live in this ghetto as of the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The gate leading to the ghetto on the market square is the original gate. The ghetto covers an area of approximately 12.35 acres. Originally the ghetto had 138 houses. Today about 70 remain.

In the ghetto were three synagogues, a hospital, a municipal house, a butchery, a school, a spa and a fountain. Around 1857, the Jewish population peaked with 1,810 Jews. Jews were about 1/3\textsuperscript{rd} of the population of the town.

The synagogue is a Baroque structure dating from 1639. Jewish artists from Poland and Ukraine richly decorated the interior. Prayers are painted on ceilings and walls.

**Pilsen** (Plzeň in Czech)*

The ninth town that we visited was Plzeň (Wikipedia, population 169,033) is located 52 miles from Prague. Plzeň is home to the world famous Pilsner beer and Škoda Works. The city became the easternmost European city liberated by the US Army in WWII.
We visit the two preserved active synagogues and met a holocaust survivor, a member of the local Jewish community. Only one of these, the Old Synagogue, is a site of the 10 Star Project. The Old Synagogue was built in 1859 in the gardens of the Jewish municipal house. A second synagogue, the Great Synagogue, opened in the 1890s. It, is the fifth biggest synagogue in the world. When the Great Synagogue was built in 1892, the Old Synagogue was used only for occasional events. Today the Old Synagogue is the main synagogue. The Great Synagogue, in need of repair and funding, still is used for its original purpose; however, it is too big for ordinary services.

* *Plzeň is on the accompanying map; however, it is not numbered as I did not show any slides from this town.*