SYNAGOGUE MUSEUM: The Maisel Synagogue, a superb example of Renaissance architecture built in 1590, now serves as an exhibition venue within Prague's Jewish Museum complex

A Precious Legacy

Forty years after the Prague Spring, Leo Pavlat and his museum reflect the reemergence of Czech Jewry

Daniel Savery, Prague

LEO PAVLAT WAS 17 YEARS old when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague in August 1968 and put a brutal end to the brief period of political liberalization that became known as the "Prague Spring." For the next two decades, until the Iron Curtain was ripped down in 1989, the Czech capital's cultural and religious life was virtually silenced by the Communist regime.

Today, 40 years later, Dr. Pavlat is director of Prague's Jewish Museum, the Czech Republic's most popular museum. It is located next to the beautifully-restored Spanish Synagogue, a Moorish-style building completed in 1868, which is part of the museum complex and houses a permanent exhibition on the history of Czech Jews. Indeed the museum is the unifying heart of Prague's Jewish community. The museum maintains four historic synagogues – Maisel, Spanish, Pinkas and Klausen and the Hevra Kadisha hall, as well as the old Jewish Cemetery.

One can easily spend an entire day wandering around the fascinating museum. One of the most intriguing aspects of the museum is that its collections and exhibitions are dispersed in refurbished synagogues around the Jewish Quarter. Sometimes disturbing, often inspiring, the exhibitions provide a unique window into perhaps one of the most precious collections of Judaica left in Europe. In the Pinkas Synagogue, visitors can view pictures drawn by children killed in the Terezin ghetto/concentration camp and read 80,000 names, of about one third of Czechoslovakia's Holocaust victims, inscribed on its walls. The Jewish cemetery dates from the 15th century and is the burial place of Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, often associated with the Golem folktale. The Maisel Synagogue is a superb example of Renaissance architecture – and has survived fires, pogroms and decades of neglect. In fact, each building has a significant story to tell.

Speaking to The Jerusalem Report in his spacious, modern office, Pavlat, the son of a Holocaust survivor, says that having grown up under Communist repression, he understands the true value of freedom. In the 1970s and 80s, after obtaining a doctorate in journalism, Pavlat's day job was editor of a children's publishing house, but he was also unofficially in charge of underground activities in the Prague Jewish community and one of a circle of young activists who campaigned for democracy by writing for underground magazines and pirate radio stations. These activities brought him to the attention of the secret police and he was forbidden to meet certain people in public and, for years, he couldn't visit Jewish institutions.

"At that time the Jewish Museum was like an island," says the bespectacled, grey-bearded, but youngish-looking Pavlat, speaking English with a gentle Czech accent. "It existed but at the same time it did not exist. It was partly opened for foreigners, but local researchers working here were not allowed to be in touch with their colleagues abroad. There were no books in Hebrew and it was almost impossible to learn the language. When I became more active in the underground movement, I was labeled a Zionist and a subversive element, so I was not allowed access to the Jewish Museum's library. It was strictly controlled by the secret police and was not able to do its job."

PAVLAT'S PERSONAL TALE echoes that of a whole generation of Czech Jews. From 1968 to the end of 1989, he was unable to express his Jewish identity in public because of state anti-Semitism. During this period, the Holocaust could not be mentioned, since this was considered a subversive topic by the secret police and survivors were silenced. After the 1990 "Velvet Revolution" led by playwright and newly-elected president Vaclav Havel, Jewish topics became enormously popular, partly because some Jewish personalities such as Pavlat had helped overthrow communism.

Diplomatic relations with Israel, broken off in 1967 after the Six-Day War, were restored and, in July 1990, Pavlat, who had joined the Foreign Ministry, became the second secretary at the Czech Embassy in Tel Aviv. When he returned to Prague in 1994, he was appointed director of the Jewish Museum. It has become an enormous international success and in 2007 alone, it welcomed 660,000 visitors.

The museum was established in 1906 to preserve artifacts from synagogues that had been recently demolished due to the reconstruction of the Jewish quarter. In a bizarre and tragic irony, it was the Nazi invasion in March 1939 that led to the huge expansion of its collection. Hitler intended the entire Jewish Quarter of the city to become a museum of an "extinct race" and the museum to become a storehouse for over 200,000 objects, books and archival material from all over Central Europe.

The wartime Jewish staff, who had already lost their families and working under constant threat of deportation and death, devoted themselves to preserving this legacy, under the supervision of Dr. Karel Stein (1906-1961). The staff only survived while they could prove that they were 'useful' to the Nazis. The vast majority lost this fight and were deported to Terezin and Auschwitz. However, one specialist who survived was Hana Volavkova, who after the war returned to work at the museum.

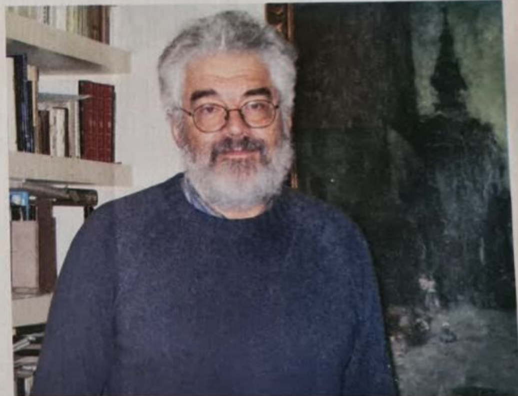
After the Nazi defeat, Dr. Volavkova (1904-1985), became the director on behalf of the community. "The existence of the Jewish Museum in Prague was paid for by the lives of nearly all those who worked there during the war," she is quoted in a booklet published after the war. "It was these people – people who were to die without burial – who laid the foundations for the post-war museum." In 1950, ownership was transferred to the Communist regime and it was renamed the State Jewish Museum.

Volavkova remained director, but during the tense atmosphere of the political trials of the 1950s, Jewish themes were suppressed. The only exhibitions held at that time displayed children's drawings from Terezin. When Vilem Benda became director in 1961, the number of exhibitions increased slightly, culminating in the 'Millennium Judaicum Bohemicum' (The Thousand Years of the Jews of Bohemia) exhibition in 1968. During the two decades after the Soviet invasion of August 1968, the museum fell into disrepair and hardly any new exhibitions or renovations were carried out. In 1994, its collections were handed over to the Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC), which serves as an umbrella organization for Jewish institutions in the country.

"The Jewish Museum won fame for having survived the war and the Communist era, but when it was inherited by the Jewish Federation, it was in a very poor state. There was only one computer and everybody was writing on typewriters," says Pavlat. "It was absolutely neglected, no care, no exhibitions. So, of course we wanted to secure what we had – a very precious Jewish legacy."

After 10 years of restoration, today it is one of the most famous Jewish museums in the world.

GHETTO LIFE BEGAN IN BOHEMIA (now the Czech Republic) in 1179, when the church announced that Christians should avoid touching Jews and a set of walls was built in the Stare Mesto area of Prague. By day movement was free, but in the evening and on festivals the gates of the ghetto were locked. In medieval times the Jewish community faced pogroms, banishments and murder allegations. In the 16th century, the ghetto became a center of Jewish mysticism and had a population of around 7,000 inhabitants, among them, Rabbi Loew. The museum will mark the



MUSEUM DIRECTOR: Leo Pavlat's personal tale echoes that of a whole generation of Czech Jews

400th anniversary of his death, September 7, 2009, with a special exhibit.

In 1784, under Emperor Joseph II, the ghetto gates were opened and, by 1850, it was incorporated into the city and renamed Josefov. Before World War II, the Jewish community was one of the largest in Europe – over 92,000 Jews lived in Prague. After mass deportations to the ghetto/concentration camp of Terezin (around 40 miles outside the city) and later to Auschwitz, less than 15,000 Czech Jews remained. Of the vast majority of Czech Jews who were taken to Terezin (or Theresienstadt), 97,297 died, among whom were 15,000 children. Only 132 of those children were known to have survived.

More than a quarter of a million Czechoslovak Jews were murdered in the Holocaust and more than 60 synagogues in the Czech lands were destroyed.

GOLEM COUNTRY: Prague's Jewish Cemetery dates from the 15th century and is the burial place of Rabbi Judah Loew, often associated with the Golem folktale

The Soviet Red Army entered Prague to a rapturous reception on May 9, 1945. Not surprisingly, the Communist Party swept the board in the 1946 elections. Under pressure from Stalin, its leaders were soon encouraged to stamp out religious and cultural activity, including Judaism. The regime demolished around 90 synagogues and dozens of Jewish cemeteries were closed down. Nearly half of the country's 15,000 Jews emigrated to Israel after the war, but after 1949 emigration became almost impossible.

The Slansky trial of 1952 had a clearly anti-Jewish character: 11 of 14 accused were Jews and eight among them were executed. Rudolf Slansky, then general secretary of the Czech Communist Party, and 13 others were accused of being 'disloyal' elements and of participating in a Trotskyite-Zionist conspiracy against the Communist parties in central Europe. In subsequent trials hundreds of Jews were sentenced to long-term imprisonment, sent to hard labor without trial and dismissed from their posts. Those Jews who did not manage to emigrate to Israel kept their Jewish identity secret. The Jewish Museum survived the onslaught but became a focus of propaganda, with its exhibits exalting the wartime role of the Communists.

By the mid-1960s, the more obvious anti-Semitism was replaced by insidious state anti-Zionism. Pavlat remembers his anger at the Czech media's biased coverage of the Six-Day War in 1967. "It was very important for me to know the truth about what was happening in Israel," he recalls. "At that time you could find articles in the press not only against Israel, but also against Jews." The media bias against Israel in 1967 made him more interested in finding out what happened to his own family. He says his mother rarely spoke of the Holocaust because of fear of the Communist regime.

BY 1968 THE POLITICAL TIDE WAS changing and when reform-minded Alexander Dubcek took over the Communist Party leadership in January, he ordered an end to censorship and encouraged Communist reformers to start a broad debate about the political direction of Czechoslovakia. Dubcek wanted to introduce a new kind of communism, "socialism with a human face."

Many young Jews were involved in the events of the Prague Spring and saw it as a way of liberating their country from years of oppression. Young Jews such as Pavlat were now able to ask questions openly about the Holocaust and their Jewish heritage for the first time in their lives and were eager to attend the marches and protests with fellow students.

Then Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev declared that events in Prague were "no longer an internal matter" and a massive Warsaw Pact force was sent in to stamp out the Czech exercise in democracy. Some 90 civilians were shot dead, including an old school friend of Pavlat's named Ivan Laja. According to the American Joint Distribution Committee in Vienna, after the Soviet invasion of 1968, 3,400 Jews left the country. The secret police kept a close eye on the remaining Jewish community and many university lecturers and other Jewish intellectuals lost their jobs. Czechoslovakia became one of the most repressive countries in the Eastern bloc and the Jewish community once again found itself isolated.

Sylvie Wittmann, a lay leader of a Progressive Jewish congregation in Prague called Bejt Simcha, says: "If you went to the Jewish quarter and the Jewish Museum in those days – the guide would say, 'The Jews did, the Jews ate, the Jews felt, the Jews celebrated,' as if the Jews did not exist anymore, as if Hitler had won the war. I thought, 'We Jews are not the stones from the cemetery of the Maharal – we are living people.'" Wittmann, in her 20s in the early 1980s, witnessed this attitude while working in the tourism industry.

Nevertheless, in the 1980s Western interest in Prague's Jewish legacy was growing. In 1983-1985 the museum held its largest foreign exhibition entitled 'Precious Legacy' in cities across the United States and Canada. The Communists had no idea how big the impact of the exhibition would be. It set new attendance records for Judaic-themed exhibitions and inspired people to travel to Prague once more. Also, the reforms of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev were being broadcast all over the world and Communist attitudes were starting to change throughout Europe.

In 1986, Wittmann, who had set up a business called Wittmann Tours, began leading tours of Terezin and Josefov. "The Prague Jewish community had nearly vanished as a result of the Nazis and 40 years of Communist rule," she says, "and my aspiration was to bring the remnants of Czech Jewry back to the abandoned synagogues." Wittmann was born into a Jewish family in northern Bohemia in 1956 and although she lived under the Communist era, she always held onto her Jewish identity. "I have to say honestly that anything I ever started, started with anger," says Wittmann, who studied theology before leading tours. "I began to see countless numbers of mainly American and English Jews coming here, with no guides, no explanation and no religious services."

However, by 1989 a new revolutionary spirit was sweeping across Eastern Europe and in November, just seven days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Prague students armed with candles and flowers confronted baton-wielding police. For six weeks Prague was in the throes of the "Velvet Revolution" – a series of strikes, pickets and celebrations that culminated in the election of Vaclav Havel to the presidency on December 29, 1989.

Immediately after the "Velvet Revolution," the long process of restitution of Jewish property began and the Federation of Jewish Communities assembled around 1,000 records of communal Jewish property. The list was incorporated into a government bill. In 1992, the Pinkas Synagogue reopened as a permanent exhibition site of the Jewish Museum. And after almost a quarter of a century of interrupted work, the task of inscribing the walls of the synagogue with over 80,000 names of Czechoslovak Jews who perished in the Holocaust, was completed. The Maisel Synagogue, which dates from 1590, was restored in 1995, followed by the Spanish Synagogue (built in 1868) in 1998. These synagogues are now part of the Jewish museum, located in Josefov, which in post-Communist times has become a fashionable up-market neighborhood lined with designer shops. Ironically, it seems the old ghetto is now hot property.

Today Jewish tourists from all over Europe, the United States and Israel, flock to Prague, hungry to discover the city's Jewish history. "The majority of our visitors are foreigners," says Pavlat, "but at the same time we have developed programs for our local audience because I think we owe them," referring to residents of Prague, Jews and non-Jews, who helped keep the Jewish museum alive by financial help and community support. "In 1996 we established the educational and cultural center with 8,000 students a year, studying courses on Jewish culture, anti-Semitism, Jewish tradition and religion. We have a program called "Neighbors who Disappeared" to help people trace and find Jewish friends or neighbors and find out what happened to them. They can learn about the history of local Jewish communities that do not exist anymore."

THE FJC STATES THAT THERE ARE over 3,000 registered members of Jewish communities in the Czech Republic (in 1993 Czechoslovakia peacefully split into the independent Czech Republic and Slovakia), of whom 1,600 reside in Prague. Finding exact figures for the total Jewish population is difficult, due to decades of intermarrying and emigration. Thomas Kraus, FJC executive director, says, "There are a number of various Jewish 'secular' organizations which fall under the auspices of the Federation, including the Union of Jewish Youth, a branch of the World Union of Jewish Students, sporting clubs Maccabi and Hakoach, the Women's Zionist Organization and the Terezin Initiative, (a non-profit organization that supports and pursues research into the history of the Nazi's "Final Solution" in the Czech territories of Bohemia and Moravia). Altogether, these institutions comprise approximately another 2,000 people. It is estimated that there are an additional 10,000 to 15,000 unregistered Jews in the country."

There are three regularly functioning Orthodox synagogues in Prague: the Altneuschul (Orthodox), the High Synagogue (modern Orthodox) and the Jubilee Synagogue on Jeruzalemska street (also known as the Jerusalem Synagogue). In addition, Chabad also holds services at its center on Parizska Street, in the heart of Josefov.

There have been disputes within the community over control of the Altneuschul (Old-New synagogue, dating from 1270), the oldest functioning synagogue in Europe. The tension began in 2004, when Rabbi Karol Sidon, the chief rabbi of the Czech Republic, was dismissed by Tomas Jelinek, the head of the Prague Jewish community executive board. This infuriated those community members who admired Sidon as a former anti-Communist dissident, credited by many with helping to rebuild the Jewish community after 1989. Jelinek, who is secular, and Sidon, who is Orthodox, had contrasting visions for the community's future as well as personal differences. They took their dispute to a rabbinical court in Israel, which backed Jelinek. Sidon, who had been presiding over services for more than a decade at the Altneuschul, was moved to the more modern High Synagogue.

Prague's two liberal communities – Bejt Simcha and the ZLU (Jewish Liberal Union) are much smaller and there is no Progressive synagogue. Occupying a modest apartment building, the Bejt Simcha community center offers educational programs, including Hebrew lessons, and holds Shabbat eve services in its library. Except for a small Magen David at the entrance, Bejt Simcha looks like any other apartment building in Prague's new city. Inside, it also houses a private Jewish school, for children aged 4-16. More than 60 children take part in activities at the school, which offers a pluralistic view of the Jewish traditions. Bejt Simcha has over 100 members and publishes a monthly magazine Maskil, which is distributed to all the Jewish communities and other institutions all over the Czech Republic. ZLU is a smaller congregation of around 80 people and rents a room off the old town square on Dlouha Street for Shabbat eve services. There are also two Lauder Orthodox schools in the city, an elementary school and a secondary school, with approximately 130 students. The main functioning synagogues also run summer and evening classes catering for all ages.

Anti-Semitism is not seen as a problem in the new Czech Republic. Last November a right-wing extremist group linked to neo-Nazis planned a march through the Jewish quarter. The proposed march was opposed by Jewish leaders in Prague, including Pavlat, and was eventually banned by City Hall.

There were five reported anti-Semitic incidents in the Czech Republic last year, including the overturning of 23 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Pisek, south of Prague. A 2000 law outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of six months to three years for public denial, questioning, approval of or attempts to justify the Nazi genocide.

"Generally speaking anti-Semitism is on the margin of society," says Pavlat. "You cannot find texts or verbal expressions of anti-Semitism at political levels. Of course there are groups of neo-Nazis and there are extreme leftists that attack Zionism using anti-Semitic stereotypes, but these people are purely extremists."

Pavlat believes that, 40 years after the historic events of the Prague Spring, the Jewish community shares an unbreakable bond. "This is a community of common faith," he says. "This is a community, which survived the Shoah and this memory is a very important part of Jewish identity here in Prague." He pauses for a moment. "During the Communist regime Jewish topics were taboo. Many people had a distorted view of Jews, so we aimed to improve this. I would say that we have succeeded." ●