

Monuments of Jewish Culture in Prague and Czechoslovakia



Statue of Rabbi Loew in the City Hall of Prague

The undated 14-page brochure with just as many illustrations, probably produced in the 1930s for English-speaking tourists, is a rare text and picture document of the Jewish culture in Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia and the Sub-Carpathians, which was destroyed by the Nazis and their proxies from 1938 onwards. In a brief but precise form, it deals with the different historical developments of the Jewish communities in the various parts of what was then Czechoslovakia, with a focus on the capital Prague, as well as their architectural and artistic heritage.

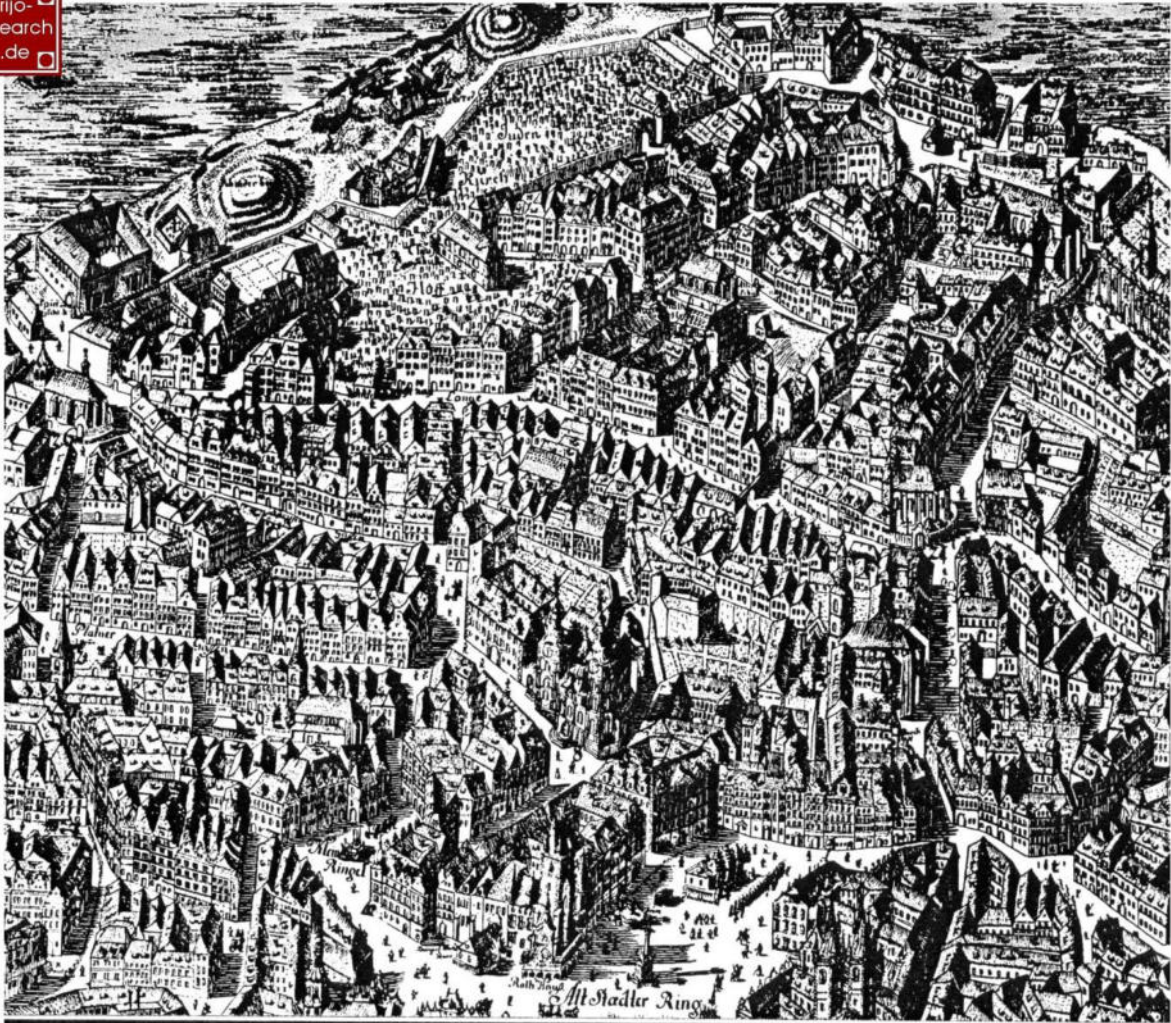
Looking at the black and white photos makes one wistful considering the loss of people and the specific civilization they created, which radiated throughout Europe.



MONUMENTS OF JEWISH CULTURE



IN PRAGUE AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA



A Bird's-Eye View of the Jewish Quarter in Prague about 1760



MONUMENTS OF JEWISH CULTURE IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

THE JEWISH ELEMENT IN THE REPUBLIC

The Carpathian range of mountains divides the Jewish culture in Czechoslovakia into two groups: in the west (historical countries of Czechoslovakia) the *modern* spirit predominates; in the east—visible not only in dress but also in education and customs—the Jewish *tradition* has been maintained uninterrupted throughout the centuries. This pronounced difference is also visible in the statistics: in 1930 there were 356,830 adherents of the Mosaic religion in the whole country, or 2·42 per cent of the total population, of which over 117,000 or 1·1 per cent were in the historical countries, over 136,000 or 4·11 per cent in Slovakia, and over 102,000 or 14·14 per cent in Subcarpathian Russia. From west to east the percentage of births increases, and the general well-being decreases rapidly. On the whole there is a considerable surplus of births and the percentage of deaths is smaller than for all the other nationalities in the Republic. In the west the Jewish population are employed for the greater part in industry, commerce, transport, and professions; in the east in handicrafts, small trades, and agriculture in its smallest form.

But everywhere there is *full civil freedom* based on democracy

and the ideas of Th. G. Masaryk, its noble founder. It is only since the existence of the Republic that the Jews could openly call themselves a nation. The national perspective of the Jews is very varied: 87,000 Jews have declared their nationality as Czechoslovak, over 45,000 as German, nearly 17,000 as Hungarian, nearly 1100 as Ruthenian, and more than 204,000 or 57·3 per cent as Jewish.

HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN PRAGUE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The real museum of the history of Jewish culture is *Prague*, the capital of the country, which is very rich in objects of interest reflecting Jewish culture back to its medieval beginnings in all its details, and with that mystic charm which belongs to the incomparable character of the Old Town in Prague. J. D. Huber's bird's-eye view, a pen-and-ink drawing (ill.) dating from about 1760, shows the Jewish town, founded in the thirteenth century and enlarged since 1627—with the tower of the *Jewish Town Hall* and the Old-New Synagogue in the middle—fully preserved in its original state. This settlement was preceded by another on the other side of the *Vltava*, in the "Malá Strana" (Little Town), which was visited by *Ibrahim ibn Jakub* in 965, and described as a centre of activity of the east-west commercial metropolis of Prague. But that second settlement in the

Old Town was the one with the future and was favoured and given legal protection by the prudent, town-loving King Přemysl Otakar II (1254—1268). The sound energy of the Jewish community in Prague survived all hardships, wars, and other catastrophies, which the medieval Jews in general had to suffer (in 1389 a cruel massacre of the Jews). In addition to *the tradespeople* the Jewish *craftsmen* maintained their right to work under difficult conditions and created the basis of social wellbeing. In 1512, at a time of the worst oppression, a great spiritual feat of great importance for the general cultural life was achieved by the establishment of a Hebrew printing-office, which soon became world-famous (Gerson ben Salomo Kohen and his son Mordechal Zemach). This was highly important, because in the Ghetto all life was based on faith, and faith on knowledge. The reigns of Rudolph II and his brother Matthew (1576—1619) brought the Jews a so far-going improvement in their position, that this period proved to be the beginning of a golden age lasting till the middle of the seventeenth century. This favourable turn found its expression in an increase in the Jewish population: about 1600 there were only 4000 Jews in the whole of Bohemia, in 1636 there were already 7815 in Prague alone, and in 1708 about 12,000, whereby Prague had one of the largest

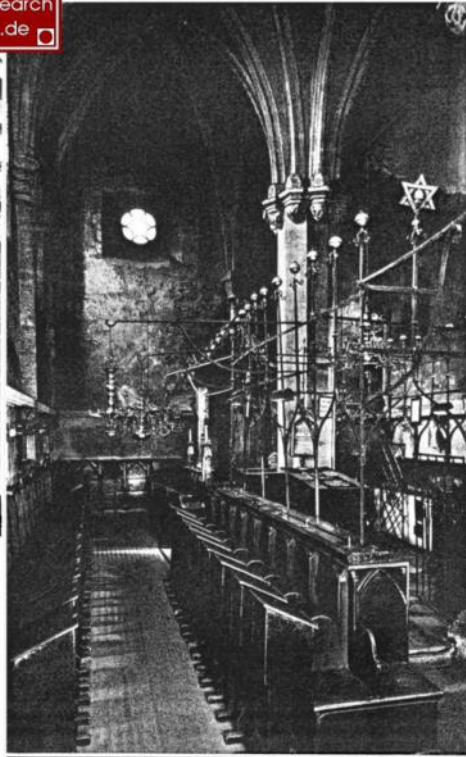
Jewish communities in Europe. And always the trade in money and goods, to which the Jews were forced here as elsewhere by the general economic constitution, played an important rôle. The most valuable work the Jews did was to give an impetus to all kinds of handicrafts: immigration from the East (1648) was of considerable help to this end, so that nearly all handicrafts were represented in the Jewish towns. In the Prague Ghetto there were even guilds with emblems and banners. This Jewish community had a sound economic structure which further arrivals from Vienna (1670) only stimulated. The Jewish public-mindedness flourished. Soon after the beginning of the epoch Mordechaj Meysl (1528—1600), the wealthy head of the Prague community, founded, at a cost of more than 10,000 Thalers, the *Meysl Synagogue* (1592), named after him, richly equipped but now fully rebuilt, a hospital, a ritual bath, and many other things. The ennobled Jakob Bassevi von Treuenberg (1570—1634) was his worthy successor. The Prague Ghetto was celebrated for its high spiritual life, characterized by *mysticism*, which was here united with the deepest erudition and fidelity to faith. The most prominent representative of this period was Juda ben Bezalel, called the "*High Rabbi Löw*" (about 1520—1609), the religious leader of the community, organizer of the Chewara Kaddisha, founded





The Statue of High Rabbi Löw (Löw ben Bezalel), a Masterpiece of Sculpture by Šaloun in the City Hall of Prague

in 1564, founder of the "Klaus Synagogue" (burnt down in 1689 and now fully rebuilt), and author of 19 treatises (including "Gur arje", a commentary on the Bible). By his knowledge of mysterious miraculous powers—he is reputed to have breathed life into a clay-figure, the Golem, made by himself—he be-



The Old-New Synagogue, Interior

came one of the most popular figures in world literature, and has been sung by many poets (including Gustav Meyrink and Max Brod). His memory has been preserved by Ladislav Šaloun by a monument in a niche in the outside wall of the new Prague City Hall. His tombstone in the old Jewish Cemetery is much visited.

Further, among many other authorities of religious science, mention may be made of: *Rabbi Jesaja Hurwitz*, the cabbalist; and *Rabbi Jontov Lipmann Heller*, the commentator. *David Gans* (1541—1631), author of the chronicle of "Zemach David" (history of the world and of the Jews to 1592), was celebrated as a geographer, mathematician, and astronomer, and was in lively relations with Johannes Keppler, Regiomontanus, and Tycho de Brahe, his prominent contemporary scientific colleagues.

THE JEWISH QUARTER

The life of the Prague Jews was centred in the former Jewish Town. Its centre is the Maislova Street, with the Old-New Synagogue and the Jewish Town Hall, which also houses the High School. This is the only part of the old Jewish Town where the appearance of the medieval Ghetto has been kept untouched till the present day. There is a report from 1689 that 318 Jewish houses and 11 synagogues were burnt down in this densely populated quarter.

THE OLD-NEW SCHOOL

The most important and most venerable Jewish monument of Prague, celebrated throughout the world, is the *Synagogue*, which was called the *Old-New School* to differentiate it from the Old School destroyed by fire in 1142, and from the New School erected later. The Prague Old-New Synagogue is the only one of the three large Synagogues of the German middle ages which has been preserved fundamentally unchanged; the Synagogue in Worms (1084) has been thoroughly changed in the course of time, and the Synagogue in Regensburg (1227) was destroyed.

Probably built after 1316, the Synagogue originally consisted of only the gabled building without the low out-buildings. A simple, serious, and worthy piece of masonry of grey stone, with a single external decoration on the south side, where on the portal there are bells, capitals with goblet-leaves, and in the space over the door the branches of a vine—not dissimilar to the portal of the Minster in Strasbourg, which is in early-Gothic style. Nevertheless, it can create an impression of something earlier, even of Romanesque style. The building does not rise freely in the air but seems to be rooted in the ground, so that it has a real Jewish character, a product of the Prague Ghetto, in spite of the obvious influence of the contemporary

and earlier ecclesiastical buildings. Today the Synagogue is entered through a hall in the south side. The old entrance is at the east end of the hall, the descending steps of which only increase the impression of a cellar. Three thick stone-belts carry the pointed ton of the building, which was probably begun in the fourteenth century and possibly served as a room for instructing boys (*Cheder*). Through the previously mentioned portal the inner room of the Synagogue is entered. It belongs to the group of those



South Hall of the Old-New Synagogue



Group of Tombstones in the Old Cemetery in Prague

double-naved halls, which predominated synagogue construction in the Middle Ages from the eleventh to the sixteenth century, and is witness to the conservative, pious, real Jewish spirit of these buildings, which remain faithful to a tradition that, once accepted, was witness of the joys and sufferings. The room is 14.3 metres (47 ft.) long and 7.1 metres (23 ft.) wide. The walls, 1 metre or 39½ in. thick, open with funnel-shaped holes from the narrow women's room (built in the seventeenth century); the two octagonal columns in the middle are 9 metres (29½ ft.) high but very massive; and the vaulting supported by olive-shaped corbels with carved foliage: all this creates in the interior an overpowering solemnity. Even if the prayer-reader's desk were not sunk a little in the ground, according to an old custom, the whole room would repeat fervently with the psalmist: "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord!" The pews run along the walls facing the middle, where the raised Bima (Almemor), the place of the Thora-reading, is situated between the two columns, surrounded by a net of wrought iron. Above the pews there is a cornice, over which the half-round wall-columns rise, the capitals of which are all different, but always stiffly surrounded by leaves. On this system of supports rest the ribs of the vaulting, four for one bay, but then a fifth—to avoid the form of a cross—leading

to the longitudinal walls where it is supported on a corbel. In the middle of the east wall, in the direction of prayer, rests a few steps higher, the holy ark (aron hakodesh), with two stone balustrades with panels of openwork shamrock arcades at the sides, and with obelisks on its corner-columns. The portal of the holy ark crowns a triangular gable adorned with stone crabs and filled with vine-leaves. These unique balustrades and the Aron (the only similar example of which is in Miltenberg on the Main) belong to *the most important monuments of synagogue art in Europe*. They lead back to the origin of the Old-New School. Formerly candles were fitted on iron spikes above the wall-cornice at the time of prayer and for the meetings of the community which took place here. This weak and uncertain light was overpowered by the darkness, and created in the old Synagogue a perfect Jewish atmosphere. Later star-shaped, brass oil lamps and hanging chandeliers were put on the horizontal bars of the Bima. On the rear column there is a present from the Emperor for Jewish help during the siege of the city in the Thirty Years War—a banner of purple brocade with the Swedish hat in a David's star on its field.

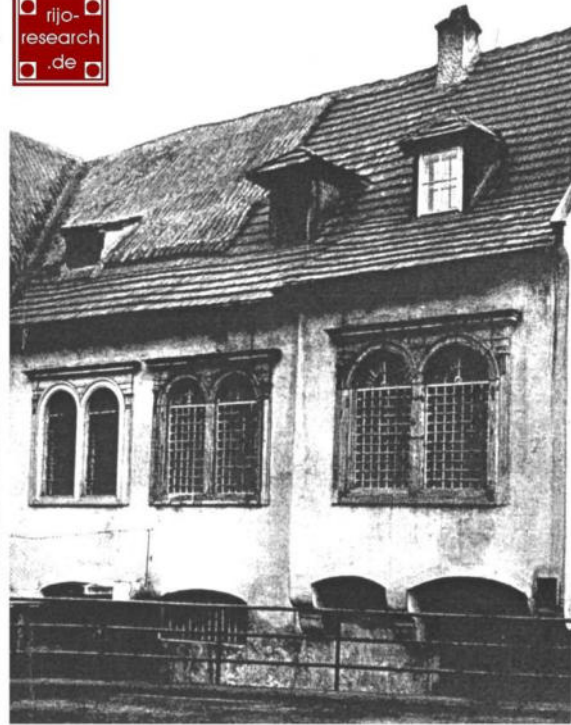
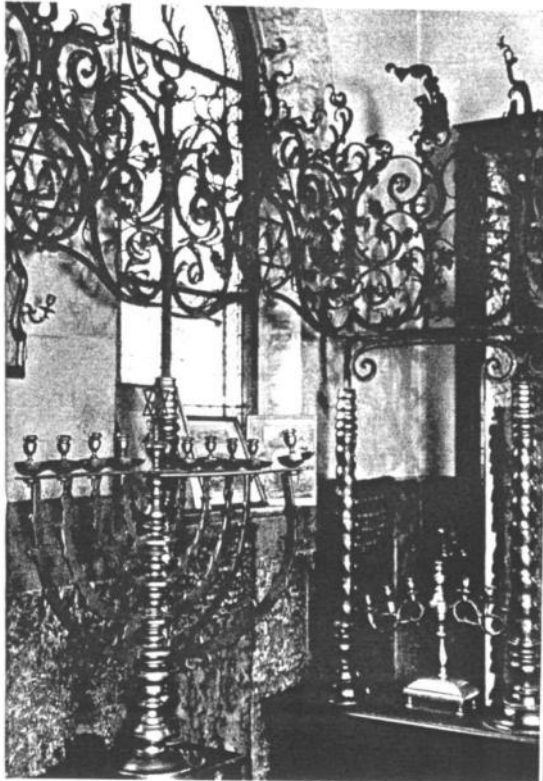
THE "HIGH SCHOOL"

Opposite the Old-New School is an old grey building (built by de Herz, a Jewish Master), supported by sloping



West Side of the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague

pillars. Externally Gothic, the building has low vaultings on the ground level. Above it is the "high School", a Synagogue, the interior of which is light on account of the high windows, so that the Baroque ceiling decoration can readily be seen.



THE JEWISH TOWN HALL

The *Jewish Town Hall* was erected by Joseph Schlesinger of Breslau in 1754—65, after the destruction by fire of an older building for the same purpose. Up to the Corinthian capitals of the flat wall-columns and to the tiled roof, which projects very prominently and has two corrugations, it has

Almen Railing of the Gipsy School in the Jewish Museum in Prague

the forms of *late German Baroque*. On account of this roof the building has a popularity extending far beyond Prague: over the middle of the front the double roof-window with volutes has a gable and this gable has a David's star (Mogen David). An ornamental tower rises at the corner, the Swedish hat in a David's star above its knob. In the roof-window on the narrow side is a dial with Hebrew figures, both pointers of which move to the left—the symbol of Jewish Prague. The Town Hall has one of *the most important Jewish libraries in the world* (about 25,000 books, including several *early-prints* and *Prague unicates*).

MUSEUM AND CEMETERY

Further important buildings are the "*Klaus*" and the *Jewish Museum* (remarkable collection of curiosities and religious utensils, including the late-Baroque bronze railing of the Almemor from the former "Gipsy School", in the rich foliage of which the Prague motive, the hat in Mogen David, is again interlaced several times). The Old *Jewish Cemetery* is a special object of interest. Huber's drawing shows that up to the end of the eighteenth century the Jewish Cemetery extended to the Vltava like a real city of graves, the Klaus School taking up the middle of one side. In 1896, part of the cemetery became a building site for new streets. Nevertheless it is still an object of interest of the most

affecting kind. What applies to the Old-New School is also true of this cemetery: nobody has seen historic Prague thoroughly, before he has seen this cemetery. The entrance is near the new premises of the *Chewra kaddisha* (with wall-pictures from the second half of the eighteenth century which depict the activity of the Holy Brotherhood in a naïve, but still penetrating, manner). The Cemetery contained nearly 15,000 tombstones, the oldest dating from the tenth century. They are simple stones with various devices. Those of the priests are with blessing hands, those of the Levites with water cans, others have pictures of animals representing the surnames of the deceased. Also there are sarcophagi of very celebrated men and women, including those of Mordechaj Meysl, the High Rabbi Löw, and many others. All this confusion of stones is intersected with grass and bushes, shaded by old trees: Death's rich harvest embedded in Nature springing up afresh from year to year, a highly significant, highly picturesque place, and therefore more frequently reproduced in pictures than any other cemetery in the world.

THE "PINKAS SCHOOL"

In the immediate neighbourhood is the *Pinkas Synagogue*, first so called in 1492, although probably founded still earlier, and rebuilt first in 1535, and again about 1600. This final





rebuilding was by Juda Goldschmied de Herz, a Jewish architect, who began with late-Gothic ideas, but completed the building with Renaissance motives. In the interior he united the two original main rooms (a one-naved hall with net-vaulting) and the new south tract (the winter school and a women's school over the choir) by means of an open arcade. As opposed to the free and magnificent Renaissance synagogues of Italy, which are all the work of masters who were not Jews, the building is simple, naïve, and intimate.

THE 18th AND 19th CENTURY IN PRAGUE

Even later the Jewish town of Prague remained a *Town of Synagogues*, but during the Baroque period the finer creative art was limited to the decoration of the holy rooms with more and more magnificent religious utensils (e. g. Thora crowns). Also in the evil times of the 18th century (expulsion of the Jews under Maria Theresia in 1744, compulsory limitation of Jewish marriages) spiritual life was at its height. Under the leadership of Jonathan Eybeschütz and Jecheskel Landau the seats of learning (Jeshiwoth) flourished, David Oppenheim owned a collection of about 1000 manuscripts and 6000 books, and the community finally had a population of 20,000. By the Revolution of 1848 the Jews of Prague also obtained the rights of citizenship, the *Ghetto was abolished* in 1852 and united with Prague as Josefov, and in 1896 the

old streets and houses—except for a few monuments protected by the authorities—had to be replaced by a network of modern streets.

ART MONUMENTS IN BOHEMIA

Also in the *remaining part of Bohemia* there are plenty of beautiful Jewish objects of interest for visitors from abroad to see, especially along the railway line with the world-famous spas of Františkovy Lázně (Franzensbad), Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad), and Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad). After a dreary beginning in Cheb (till 1430 with a large old Jewish community, in which the pogrom of the year of plague 1350 is kept in memory to the present day by the baneful "Mordgasse" or Murder Street, several stones in the Municipal Museum, and a tombstone dating from 1353 in the Jewish Museum in Prague) the visitor comes to the congenial zone of West Bohemian synagogue art where—in Chodová Planá since 1756, in Kynžvart since 1764, and in Nové Sedliště since 1786—the *Baroque* church-builders of this district, from single and double women's galleries and magnificent wood-carved *Thora chests*, have placed a light, gay, festive spirit at the service of the Jewish idea.

MORAVIA AND SILESIA

(THE PROVINCIAL TOWNS)

The history of the Jews in the neighbouring *Moravia and*



Silesia is similar to that in Bohemia. After they had collected in the more important towns in the Middle Ages, they were subject to occasional expulsion and spread themselves over the numerous country communities, which were united in a Moravian Provincial Union by High Rabbi Löw in Mikulov. In the seventeenth century the *Statute* of this Union consisted of 311 ordinances concerning education, the cult, and the social constitution. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the Jews became important in industry, especially in the manufacture of cloth. From 1726 they lived in *their own Ghettoes*, of which several had political autonomy till the Czechoslovak Republic was formed. Two excursions from Brno (the provincial capital with about 12,000 Jews) lead to such provincial towns which still preserve the essence of the old Moravian Ghettoes: *Boskovice* in the north, the former Jewish town surrounded by the wires of the Sabbath boundary (Eruw), with streets branching out in all directions and with small houses with steps, balconies, and verandas, the *Beth hamidrash* in a vaulted cellar, the Synagogue with recently discovered Baroque frescoes (including a primitive example from the hand of a Jewish writer, dated 1769), and the beautiful mountain cemetery—the whole, as a historical picture of civilization, a small town inside a large village. The second excursion, to the south west, leads to

Mikulov: of the 12 synagogues of the former populous and highly learned community only the Old School on Castle Hill (founded about 1450, later thoroughly rebuilt) and the New School have been retained; the same as most country communities in Moravia, Mikulov has declined considerably and the most important things are preserved in the Jewish Central Museum (manuscripts and religious requisites from the whole of Moravia-Silesia, earthenware jugs of the *Che-wara kaddisha*, one dating from 1720, the second with the coffin bearers on the silver lid, dating from 1725).

SLOVAKIA AND SUBCARPATHIAN RUSSIA

Slovakia is the district of the *Eastern Jews*. This is immediately visible in *Bratislava* with its old *Jewish quarter* on the slope of Castle Hill. This quarter forms an especially charming and moving street forking in front of the Rococo House. There is also a *Talmud High School* (*Jeshiwa*), founded about 1700, and brought to a flourishing state by Rabbi Moses Sofer (1807—40) and his family, and with a strictly organized orthodoxy and their multifarious institutions, including the "*Mewakshe Thora*", in which even to-day 250 people employed in commerce study religion every day before going to work. Slovakia has 59 Jewish elementary schools (of which 35 have Slovak as the language of instruction) and six *theological colleges*. This passage into



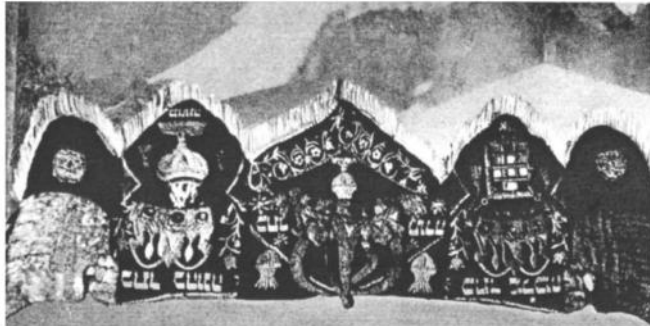
East Europe increases in *Subcarpathian Russia*. In the highlands the Jews still wear *the old dress*. Here and in the valley of the Tisa they use two Yiddish dialects: the Chassidismus with Chust and Mukačevo as centres has powerful passionate adherents; even the Jewish national cross-currents depend on the Hebrew language (several elementary schools and the semi-state grammar school in Mukačevo, the only one in the Republic).

In the present-day cultural endeavour of the young Czechoslovak State, where the Jews enjoy full civil liberty, there is no special reason for a separate Jewish culture, and the majority of the Czechoslovak Jews have amalgamated with the national cultural communities of the State. Still the objects of interest described in this booklet remain valuable cultural monuments which can interest beyond measure the visitor to Czechoslovakia, especially in consideration of the cultural-historical background of Jewish life in Europe.



Bratislava, the Forked Jewish Street showing the Rococo House

The Baroque Lambrequin (Parocheth), about 1730





High Rabbi Low ben Bezalel's Tombstone, Old Jewish Cemetery, Prague.

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