

can bring them together. *Babushki* are just as capable of making the distinction between good and bad singing, good and bad preaching, between a truly spiritual priest and one who simply goes through the motions as others in the church. These *babushki* simply have no choice, no other sphere of activity. They would be overjoyed to hear a living word from the Scriptures, but no-one offers it to them. They are, it is true, much more conservative than the rest of society and have a particular medieval perception of religious life. But both they and those who, because of the medieval nature of our church, remain outside it have the same thirst for the word of life brought by Jesus. Both they and the others are fields which are white unto harvest, waiting for the workers to come.

So we can see that one cannot agree with the bold priest's statement cited at the beginning of this article. Our church has become a church of old women. Christianity, however, has not been turned into an old people's religion. The attraction of Christianity is such that when people learn from its true source then their response to Christ and their desire to follow him cannot be suppressed even by the full weight of the oldwomanish features of our church.

It is obvious that the elderly profile of the church is not only its shame but its affliction. But in some respects it is obviously the Providence of God at work to preserve the Gospel when it was rejected in Russia by the 'wise and the reasonable'. There is no room for a condescending or judgmental attitude towards millions of our *babushki*, who have each made their small contribution to the preservation of the Gospel in our homeland, even if it is in a limited form. They deserve honour, praise and gratitude that they in all their weakness preserve our churches, fill them to capacity on feast days and daily give material support out of their often very limited means.

It must be stressed that the elderly character of the church has made it more resilient in the face of any kind of external pressure. Since they are more or less excluded from society these *babushki* are safe from persecution. They are like hardy perennials, able to withstand cold, heat and drought. However, it would be a mistake to think that such conditions represent a normal existence for the church.

VLADIMIR ZELINSKY

*Translated from Russian by
Suzanne Oliver*

Jewish Life in Czechoslovakia

Introduction

On 19 February this year a group of young Jews in Prague sent a letter of protest to the leadership of their community. They accused them of failing to ensure the community's survival and using autocratic methods to align it with the ruling communist party. 'Forty five years

after the end of the war,' they wrote, 'we are reaching a state when time could well complete what the Nazi genocide began — our Jewish life is in danger of extinction in the near future.' The appeal was signed by 25 people, including the wife of Prague's only rabbi. Interviewed by Reuters about the appeal, one of the organisers, 38-year-old Leo Pavlat,

declared: 'Sadly this number represents those active among people under the age of 50.' The group had been emboldened by reforms in Moscow, where a new Jewish centre opened in February.

Shortly after the letter was sent, the general secretary of the Jewish religious community, František Kraus, declared in the communist party daily *Rudé právo*: 'We have opportunities for a full religious life.' The 25 signatories of the February letter challenged the leadership's right to speak in the name of the community without consultation. 'Such autocratic, bureaucratic methods, the failure to consult those who are supposedly being represented, detract from the credibility of any statement,' they wrote.

A further sign of mounting concern in the Jewish community came in an article by the ageing cantor, Viktor Feuerlicht, published in *Věstník* (The Bulletin). He complained that 'not everything is right in our kosher restaurant' and that more efforts must be undertaken to promote interest in Judaism among the young. The cantor concluded 'when we think that in recent years there have been few ritual marriages, not a single circumcision, not a single bar-mitzvah and that we have 50 funerals every year, we cannot but ask how long will we last.'

These protests coincided with a document by the Czechoslovak human rights movement Charter '77,

echoing these concerns. Dated 5 April, the letter complained about the neglect and destruction of Jewish monuments and accused the state of anti-Semitism.

Following these protests, the Jewish community leadership have held three meetings at which the complaints have been discussed. At first the leadership was angry and wished to know how the February letter of protest was leaked. Discussion, however, was reported to be constructive, and centred on the education of both children and adults about their faith and culture. The younger members accused Kraus of lying about the real situation of the community in his *Rudé právo* interview. The relatively new leadership within the community constantly tried to blame the old leadership for the community's problems.

At the third meeting, held on 26 June, a decision was taken to set up a cafe in a community building on Maislerova street which would be open for anyone to give lectures on Jewish questions. The last time such a forum existed was 15 years ago. The cafe was inaugurated with an innocuous programme, but there is hope that it will develop into a centre for the revival of interest in the Jewish faith and culture. There was also a commitment at the meeting to set up an editorial committee to publish basic information for Jews to learn more about their faith.

To B. Heller,
Chairman, Regional Council of
the Jewish Community

Prague, 19 February 1989

Mr Chairman,
We, the middle and younger generation of our community, are turning to you as we are deeply perturbed by the present state of and, particularly,

by the future prospects for our Czech Jewish Religious Community. Forty five years after the end of the war, we are reaching a state when time could well complete what the Nazi genocide began: our Jewish life is in danger of extinction in the near future. Sadly, the Jewish religious tradition has been discontinued in most Czech Jewish families. As time passes, and thinking of the children who were

once taught by Rabbi Dr R. Feder, it becomes obvious that ordinary teaching in itself cannot ensure the future of our Community. After 20 years, children are once again being taught traditional Jewish values and this is a welcome improvement. Should we, however, wait for these ten children to grow up, should they be the sole bearers of our hope, or is it possible to do something now?

Most of the younger members of our community found their way to Judaism by their own efforts, as adults. Not everybody has such motivation. It is most unlikely that people, even if they have Jewish roots, will discover the deeper meaning of Judaism in their annual visit to the synagogue. Judaism has to be brought to the people, has to be explained and taught. It cannot be confined to synagogue rites. Its cultural and historical context is of great importance. The nature of our Chanukah and Purim celebrations and the content of our publications would suggest that Judaism is understood in this broader sense. Would you therefore, please, use your influence toward creating conditions which would lead to a real understanding of Judaism, particularly among the young. Experience in other countries clearly shows that even in these days Judaism aims at human understanding and intellectual development. Unfortunately, the present activities of the Jewish community leadership are lacking in the specifically Jewish tradition of addressing itself to living people. If Judaism in Bohemia and Moravia, which goes back more than 1,000 years, is to survive, we have to prove to the young that Judaism is more than happy celebrations of Chanukah and Purim and the preservation of some old customs. The leadership should create an atmosphere in which those who are interested are able to get acquainted with Judaism, to ask

questions. We would like to have free, informal meetings, without microphones or officialdom. Let those who have something to say, speak, those who are interested, listen. In addition to lectures, discussions and teaching, it is important to show films, to listen to music and it is most important that those who are interested have ready access to literature. Our library should be open for longer than two hours on two days a week. As the library funds are very limited, the Community Council should request the Jewish State Museum to give access to our members — considering the origin of their books, such a request is more than justified. Above all, it is important to activate our own publishing. It is time that some of the basic Jewish literature be published in the Czech language: works by Rashi, Maimonides, Nachmanides, Ibn Ezra, Rabbi Loew, S. R. Hirsch, M. Buber, F. Rosenzweig, G. Scholem, A. Kaplan, H. Leibowitz, E. Munk, E. Levinas, also E. Wiesel and S. Agnon. These giants of Jewish thought are hardly known in our community. As far as we know, works of these authors are not among the titles to be published. How can we think of the future if we are unable to get to know our priceless heritage? In this context, the importance of teaching Hebrew in our community cannot be sufficiently stressed. To absorb the meaning of the texts read in the Synagogue, one really has to understand the language. Hebrew, of course, is more than just grammar and syntax. By getting to know Lashon Hakodesh, the holy language, one penetrates the very spirit of Judaism. This cannot be achieved in a language school.

We think that the deciding role in the newly conceived activities of the Jewish Community ought to be played by Rabbi Dr D. Mayer. To do

this, he requires more space and authority. We therefore hope that you, too, will find his much greater influence in directing the community's affairs to be a natural requirement. This request has to be viewed in the context of the overall state of our Community. From your report on the meeting of the executive of the Jewish Community of last December, on which *Věstník* contained a detailed report, it appears that some of your appearances abroad met with negative reactions. It is possible to explain this fact by a failure to understand or prejudice toward your concept of things or, to quote you, by unjust accusations from the previous leadership and the spread of false information which a number of honest brothers and sisters, at home and abroad, believed, as, unfortunately, they still fail to understand certain matters. Like you, we also wish to live in peace and we are keen on all activities which contribute toward closer relations among people and prevention of war. At the same time we believe that such sentiments can be pursued on the international stage with greater conviction if our own community life is not burdened by divisive, unresolved problems. For the time being, little has been achieved in this direction, as shown by the statement of our senior cantor, Mr V. Feuerlicht, at the last meeting of the executive and by what we said earlier. We are convinced that greater attention should be given

to our own problems of which there are more than enough. Last year, for example, there was a declaration in the press, in the name of our community, on which the membership had not had the opportunity to voice an opinion. It is particularly regrettable that one such statement was submitted for approval to the inner circle of the leadership only well after it was sent to the press. Such autocratic, bureaucratic administrative methods, the failure to consult those who are supposedly being represented, detract from the credibility of any statement and thus do more damage than good. Mr Chairman, we approached you with this open letter in a genuine effort to improve the working of the Jewish Community. We would be pleased if all other members of our community would express their opinions on our submission. We are therefore asking you to have this open letter printed in full, in the *Věstník*. We believe that the publication of this letter will lead to a discussion in which various, generally formulated suggestions would find concrete expression. We hope that the leadership of the region and perhaps also of the Prague Community will meet us. We consider it to be imperative and would like to believe that you will share in this view.

With our greetings,

[Document signed by 25 people]

To the Czechoslovak Government
Vladimir Janku, Director of the
Government Secretariat for Church
Affairs;
The Ministry of Culture in the Czech
Socialist Republic;
The Jewish Religious Community in
Prague;

The State Institute for Care of
Monuments and Protection of the
Environment;
The Central Committee of the Union
of Anti-Fascist Militants;

It is generally known that an estimated 360,000 Czechoslovak citizens

were murdered, executed, killed in action or perished between 1939 and 1945. This figure is to be found amongst official statistics, in history books and in a wide variety of speeches, papers and articles which relate to the period of the Second World War and the fate of Czechoslovak citizens during it. Yet only seldom, and virtually never in texts aimed at the general public, do we come across the information that 240,000 to 255,000 of the total number of victims were of Jewish origin, of which a large majority were Jews living in the pre-war republic. As part of the 'final solution of the Jewish question', the Nazi administration in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the government of the Slovak state and the Hungarian and German authorities in Subcarpathian Rus organised the deportation of the Jewish population to concentration camps where, along with millions of Jews from other European lands directly or indirectly governed by Hitler's Germany, they were massacred. Children, women and old people.

Soon after the war's end it became clear that the Jews as a significant national, cultural and religious minority had been annihilated in a number of European countries. This sad fact is, to a certain degree, also true of the re-formed Czechoslovak republic, where around 44,000 persons of Jewish origin survived the holocaust, i.e. approximately one eighth of their original number. As a result the Czechoslovak public was faced with two tasks: to prevent the 1,000 year presence of a Jewish community in the Czech lands and Slovakia being forgotten and to ensure that the circumstances under which this community was liquidated are not forgotten.

In the Czech lands in particular the conditions were exceptionally propitious for this. Along with other

confiscated Jewish property, a large quantity of articles documenting the religious and public life of the massacred Jewish communities in the Czech lands was concentrated in Prague. This historical, and factually extremely valuable, material reverted after the war to the Jewish Community and was given over to the care of the Jewish Museum in Prague. In 1950 the Council for Jewish Religious Communities handed over — though not entirely willingly — the museum to the state and as the State Jewish Museum this institution is one of the most important of its kind in the world. Disused Prague synagogues were slowly adapted to house parts of the museum.

The Pinkas Synagogue, thoroughly reconstructed and restored between 1950 and 1953, was a major part of the museum. Between 1954 and 1959 its interior was converted into a memorial to the victims of Nazi persecution on the basis of proposals by the artists Jiří John and Václav Bostik. It was their idea to cover the inside walls with the names of 77,297 Jews from Bohemia and Moravia who died during the occupation. Thus the Pinkas Synagogue was transformed into an exceptionally effective memorial to the Jewish tragedy, worthy, eloquent, and in the simplicity of its surroundings, monumental.

By the early 1960s the State Jewish Museum in Prague was the only existing reminder of the life and fate of the Jews, particularly those in the Czech lands. At the same time the State Jewish Museum became a centre of academic research into the history of the Jews in Czechoslovakia.

By the late 1960s the situation had begun to change. In 1968 the Pinkas Synagogue, this memorial to the victims of Nazi persecution, was closed. The reason given was the threat to the masonry of ground

water. Since that time, fully 20 years, the building has been closed to the public. Restoration work and structural repairs are still far from complete. A whole generation has reached adulthood since repairs were begun. These have still not been completed and this memorial, a unique and irreplaceable part of the State Jewish Museum, remains closed. A memorial which provides a moving testimony to this generation (and all other visitors) to the consequences of radical totalitarianism, which totally negates human and civil rights, including the most fundamental right, that to life.

During repairs to the Pinkas Synagogue, inscriptions on the walls were either removed or painted over, allegedly because of damp patches. It has now been decided to inscribe the names of those killed on panels and to fix these to the walls. This suggests that the Pinkas Synagogue will once again become a memorial to the victims. However, we must not lose sight of the number of different decisions taken and deadlines set during repair work and how much time normally lapses between the decision and its implementation, if it ever is implemented.

Another startling fact which cannot be explained away by the necessity of structural repairs concerns a memorial plaque produced in 1970 by the national artist Břetislav Benda at the request of the Council of Jewish Religious Communities in 1968. This large piece of sculpture was to be placed on the site of the industrial exhibition halls in Prague 7. As the inscription on the left hand section reminds us (the plaque is composed of three sections) Jews from Prague and most of Bohemia were kept here before being transported to concentration camps, mainly Theresienstadt. However, the plaque has not yet been unveiled. The relevant national committees and

Czech Communist Party have repeatedly refused to allow the plaque to be put up and unveiled (most recently in 1981) despite the recommendation of the Union of Anti-fascist Militants in Prague 7. In a statement by the Council of Jewish Religious Communities (*Rudé právo*, 25 November 1987) signed amongst others by its chairman Bohumil Heller, agreeing with *Rudé právo's* attack on a statement by a group of Slovak cultural figures expressing their sense of shared moral responsibility for the fate of Slovak Jews, we read that:

An appropriate site in Prague is being sought for the outstanding monument by national artist B. Benda to commemorate the deportations of Jewish citizens.

Of course it is difficult to find a suitable place for a plaque which reads 'From this place. . .' Such a long time was spent searching for a suitable site in Prague that eventually one was found — in Theresienstadt. The plaque, or rather its central and right hand sections, were quickly fixed to the brick wall of the Theresienstadt camp next to the path leading to the crematorium and cemetery for Jewish victims. This left hand section with the text indicating the original intention of this work was, understandably, not placed alongside. According to available information a left hand section is now being prepared with a different inscription more appropriate to the newly found site. . . Clearly even in Prague in the 1980s it is not permissible to recall the deportation of Jews to their deaths.

After the Pinkas Synagogue was closed a second building of the State Jewish Museum, the Spanish Synagogue, was closed eight years ago. The reason for closure was an anticipated electrical rewiring, which has yet to take place. There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that this building will be returned to its

original function in the foreseeable future.

Three years ago the Maisel Synagogue met with the same fate. As a result, the only remaining collection of synagogical silver is inaccessible to the public. Today, in contrast to the situation in the 1960s, the visitor finds half the museum's buildings closed. And the facts suggest that they will remain closed for decades.

In addition it must be said that almost none of the previously large number of publications by the State Jewish Museum still exists. The publication *Židovské památky* (Jewish Antiquities) ceased after the first three volumes. The journal *Judaica Bohemica* is produced exclusively in foreign language versions. The public would certainly be interested in a Czech version, yet the fact is that the journal does not have even a Czech summary. The State Jewish Museum library is open to the general public, but not in its entirety. It is more difficult to gain access to the archive. The historically significant archive of the Prague Jewish Religious Community has not yet been processed, nor indexed and is therefore inaccessible to members of the community as well as researchers from other academic institutions. Similarly, certain archives relating directly to the holocaust which were accessible to all researchers in the late 1960s are now accessible only to select individuals. It is also worth mentioning that the State Jewish Museum is the only Prague museum not to organise any lectures.

However, the situation is even worse in other areas of the republic. The Theresienstadt memorial exhibition devotes little attention to the specific nature of the Theresienstadt ghetto. Considering the number of Jewish victims and the interests of the vast majority of visitors to it, this is quite inadequate. In the vast exhibition of the small camp only a

few works of Theresienstadt artists are exhibited in one small area and in the crematorium there is a small, quite inadequate exhibit. In the 1960s serious thought was given to setting up a Museum of the Theresienstadt Ghetto (financed from the considerable reserves of the State Jewish Museum in Prague, the Theresienstadt Memorial and private funds) in the former Theresienstadt school and boys' school L417. Yet in the early eighties this building was turned, at considerable cost, into a museum of the SNB [Czechoslovak police, *Tr.*]. There are few visitors, yet this museum is clearly held to be more educational to our children than objective information on the tragic fate of Jews interned in the ghetto and their resistance to Nazism.

But more alarming even than this is the devastation of Jewish monuments which has occurred over the last 20 years with the direct involvement of the district authorities and the forced agreement of the Jewish religious communities themselves. In Prague alone many Jewish cemeteries (Libeň, Žižkov Radlice, Uhřetěves) not to mention many country cemeteries have been wantonly destroyed. With the exception of the Holešov and now also Mikulov cemeteries, there has been no obvious attempt made to protect at least the most valuable synagogues and historical ghettos, many of which are unique in Czechoslovakia, if not Europe. Apart from individuals from the state Centres for Care of Memorials and certain former representatives of the Jewish Community, the local authorities, even the State Jewish Museum, a specialised institute which operates throughout the republic, no longer have any interest in protecting these memorials. Instead they are being gradually devastated and demolished, almost unnoticed.

Particular attention should be paid to the clearance of newer parts of

many Jewish cemeteries in the country which have granite tombstones dating from the end of last century to the pre-war period. These tombstones provided the best memorial to the families of the victims of the holocaust from each village. The cultural and moral decline of society has gone so far that some of the headstones have been stolen over the years without the relevant authorities paying particular attention, and the remaining stones later sold to stonemasons.

A quite separate issue relates to the attention paid to Jews and their fate in school and adult education. In the history course book for the eighth class, which studies in greater depth the period of the occupation and the Second World War, we read on the subject of the persecution of the Jews the following inaccurate and vague remarks: 'Part of the plan for ensuring German world rule was the gradual liquidation of the Jews, Slavs and other so-called racial minorities', and later 'Fascism systematically destroyed the Jewish population and Slavic people in concentration camps'. Thus the authors deal with a period which ended in the deaths of six million Jews, until recently a considerable part of the population of Europe.

The situation is similar in the mass media. Virtually no books on the Jewish tragedy are produced in Czechoslovakia and Claude Lanzmann's noteworthy documentary, *Shoa*, did not receive as much as a mention from the Czechoslovak media, let alone any showing.

The aforementioned text book keeps quiet about the fact that the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia has actually been liquidated several times over. Not only by the Nazis, but also by the subsequent incorporation of Jewish survivors into the Czech and Slovak nations without regard for their national and cultural

differences. Two mass waves of emigration — after 1948 and following 1968 — helped further reduce the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia, so that of the original 44,000 in 1945, in 1980 only 9,000 Jews remained in Czechoslovakia. (See R. Hilberg: *The Destruction of European Jews*.)

The scandalous fact that between 1970 and 1984 the Jewish community did not have its own rabbi, a situation without analogy in the 1,000 year history of the Jews in the Czech lands, is further proof of the destruction of religious and cultural life in present day Czechoslovakia. Moreover the teaching of Hebrew (classical and modern) in our schools is in terminal decline; in the early eighties those interested in learning the language lost their last opportunity to do so publicly when the language school in Prague stopped its Hebrew courses. However, the teaching of modern Hebrew was resumed this academic year.

We believe that the public has the right to demand from the appropriate authorities some explanation of these matters, namely:

1) When will the memorial to victims of Nazi persecution in the Pinkas Synagogue be reopened and who will bear responsibility for the 20 year closure?

2) Why was the commemorative plaque by national artist Břetislav Benda to the victims of the Jewish transports not placed and unveiled on the spot for which it was designed, and why years later has it been installed at Theresienstadt?

3) How has it happened that the State Jewish Museum in Prague, a unique institution in Czechoslovakia and the world, currently has half its buildings closed and why is access to the archive and other museum facilities so complicated?

4) Why does the Theresienstadt memorial not give adequate space to

the fate of Czechoslovak Jews during the Second World War, including their important contribution to the Czechoslovak struggle, and why has there not yet been created a separate ghetto museum as was considered in the 1960s?

5) Why in 1970 was the permanent Czechoslovak exhibition at the State Polish Museum in Auschwitz 'reinstalled'? During this 'reinstallation' in a dubious and offensive attempt to conceal the fact that Czechoslovak citizens of mainly Jewish origin were imprisoned and killed here, its initiators went so far as to exclude from the exhibition the unique and terrible tragedy of the Theresienstadt family camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Now the many foreign visitors to the State Polish Museum are also badly informed or misinformed about the tragedy of Czechoslovak Jews under the Nazis.

6) What steps will be taken to ensure that school children, students and the Czechoslovak public are correctly informed of the fate of European and Czechoslovak Jews as the gravity and tragedy of their lot deserves?

7) What is the unembellished reality of the present religious and cultural life of the remaining Jews in Czechoslovakia? And what do the relevant institutions propose to do to put right this unsatisfactory situation? Lastly, is there not in Czechoslovakia an as yet hidden, official and politically motivated anti-Semitism as some of the above-described phenomena indicate?

Prague 5 April 1989
Charter '77 Document No. 28

Signed by three Charter
spokespersons.

Church Life in Romania

Churches, like other institutions in Ceausescu's Romania, are under strict government control and supervision. Amongst the measures which the government has taken to make life difficult for the churches are: restrictions on the number of those allowed to train for the priesthood; state control over the appointment of clergy; administrative obstacles to the building of new churches, espec-

ially in growing urban areas; censorship of religious publications; severe restrictions on the import of new religious literature and restrictions on contact between believers and their co-religionists abroad. The following documents shed some light on the life of religious groups in Romania and their varying responses to state policies.

The Romanian Reformed Church: Needs and Opportunities

According to official statistics the Reformed Church in Romania has about 700,000 members, almost all of them from the country's Hungarian minority. There have long been protests from clergy and lay people

that the church leadership is too pliant with regard to the state, something which is seen as having a detrimental effect on the church's internal life. In 1988 a new samizdat publication, Kialto Szo (The Piercing Word) printed the following analysis of the life of the Romanian Reformed Church.