

## Jewish Cemeteries and Burial Heritage in the Czech Republic

Iva Steinová

In this contribution we will try to characterise Jewish cemeteries in the Czech Republic and specify some of them by examples of selected tombstones. In the territory of the Czech Republic there are more than 350 Jewish cemeteries with tens of thousands of individual tombstones. The prevailing majority of cemeteries are in the ownership of the relevant regional Jewish communities or the Federation of Jewish Communities; only a small part is in the ownership of towns and municipalities. These organisations pay considerable attention to maintenance and care. During the last twenty years the picture of Jewish cemeteries has changed considerably and the majority of them are successfully maintained in dignified condition. A typical part of these cemeteries is a simple *taharah* building where in several cases the original stone slab for the ritual washing of the dead has been preserved. The tombstones are a unique cultural heritage. Apart from their basic mission to honour the memory of the deceased the tombstones are an extraordinary source of knowledge of the history of Jewish communities and often have considerable artistic and historic value.

The absolute majority of Jewish tombstones have the form of the raised steles of the Ashkenazic type. Rarer are the tombs preserved since the 17th century over the graves of

Rabbis, scholars, tradesmen and representatives of Jewish communities and their wives. We can find a unique document of a lying tombstone of the Sephardic type over the grave of the de Majo family at the cemetery in Třešť (mid-19th century).

On the basis of the used material, the shape of the tombstone and the way of its processing it is possible to differentiate several typological variants that occur in certain regions. For instance, characteristic of the region of east Bohemia at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries are tombstones of asymmetrical shape. Specific tombstones of the Polish type can be found in the Osoblaha foreland of Silesia in the north-eastern part of the Czech Republic.

Many Jewish tombstones were made of wood in the past. However, they have been preserved only very rarely and today are usually found in museums (the Jewish Museum in Prague, the Museum of the town Horažďovice).

Until the end of the 18th century epitaphs were written in Hebrew as presumed by tradition. The Hebrew inscription may also include glosses in the Aramaic language or in the languages that were used by the Jews in the diaspora. Some tombstones at the cemetery in Třebíč are written in German with Hebrew letters. The inscription and decoration of the

Fig. 1 Map of the Czech Republic with localities mentioned in the article





Fig. 2 *The Jewish Cemetery in Kolín nad Labem (photo: Iva Steinová 2010)*

tombstone are a part of the message that the survivors gave about the deceased. The eulogy about the good properties and good acts describes the merits of the deceased and by means of artistic symbols the text is completed by further information given by symbols of names or surnames and professions to eschatological motifs.

In the Czech lands the oldest preserved tombstones are from the 13th and 14th centuries. Apart from Prague they were also found in the royal towns of Cheb, Brno, Olomouc and Znojmo. However, these tombstones have not been preserved in situ. Mostly they were reused for the foundations of houses or the masonry of ramparts.

The age of the cemeteries can be dated unambiguously only if the foundation deed or other documents were found. The oldest tombstones preserved in situ over the original graves date from the 15th century and are only found in Prague and in Kolín. In several other localities of Bohemia and Moravia tombstones of the 16th century have been preserved at the cemeteries. The number of cemeteries with the oldest preserved tombstones of the 17th century increased to 50 in the Czech lands. A considerable number of other cemeteries originate from the 18th century and the differ-

ences are clearly visible between the Czech and Moravian Jewish communities. While the major part of the Jewish inhabitants in Bohemia lived dispersed in countryside localities, in Moravia they concentrated mostly in large communities. This corresponds to the lower number of cemeteries in Moravia with a large concentration of burials and tombstones. In the first half of the 19th century the number of new cemeteries did not increase much. On the contrary, in the post-emancipation period of the second half of the 19th century there was a considerable increase in new cemeteries located mostly close to the municipal Christian cemeteries. The founding of new Jewish cemeteries continued in the first half of the 20th century until the Second World War.

In the Czech lands cemeteries exist where the tombstones were completely destroyed or removed (the largest losses originate from the period of the German occupation and from the period of Communist totality), and other cemeteries where thousands of tombstones can still be found. We will try to present some of them in greater detail in the following selection (Fig. 1).

The cemetery outside Prague with the oldest preserved tombstones from the 15th century is Kolín nad Labem (Fig.

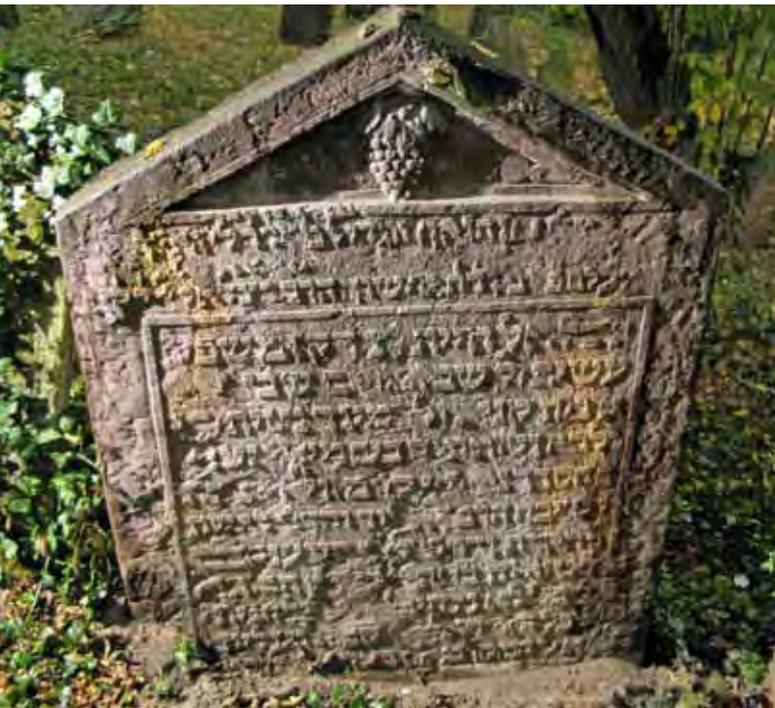


Fig. 3 The tombstone of Bezael ben Judah Leib, Jewish Cemetery in Kolín (photo: Iva Steinová 2008)

Fig. 4 Tombstones of the Rabbi Hill, Jewish Cemetery in Mikulov (photo: Iva Steinová 2010)



2). In Bohemia, it is the most significant Jewish community after Prague with a number of extraordinary personalities and Rabbis. Kolín was sometimes called the “Jewish town”, because there were significant *yeshiva* and the second oldest *Chevra kadisha* could be found there. The succession of local Rabbis has been preserved since the 15th century. Active among them in Kolín were also the relatives of the Prague Maharal called Rabbi Löw – his son Rabbi Bezael ben Judah Leib (1599, Fig. 3) and the nephew of Maharal, Rabbi Hayyim ben Sinai (1614), the son of the older brother of Maharal, Sinai. The graves of the Rabbis in Kolín are located in the last row at a place of honour at the end of the cemetery’s original area before its extension.

Another cemetery that deserves to be mentioned is the old cemetery in Roudnice nad Labem with the oldest tombstones dating from the beginning of the 17th century. Roudnice belongs to the localities with documented Jewish inhabitants, at the latest since the first half of the 16th century. The original ghetto and cemetery had to make way for the construction of Capuchin monastery and the Jews had to build their houses and a new cemetery behind the borders of the town at that time. Also at that cemetery we can find, among different scholars and Rabbis, a member of the well-known Maharal family – his nephew Rabbi Bezael ben Sinai (1621).

One of the most remarkable and extensive Jewish cemeteries in Moravia is the cemetery in Mikulov. At the latest since the 17th century Mikulov was the seat of the Moravian



Fig. 5 The tombstone of Rabbi Judah Leib Eulenburg, 1618, Jewish Cemetery in Mikulov (photo: Iva Steinová 2009)



Fig. 6 The tombstone of Rabbi Sabbatai ben Meir ha-Kohen, 1662, Jewish Cemetery in Holešov (photo: Iva Steinová 2009)

Rabbis and it is not impossible that Maharal was also active here in the 16th century. Jews lived in Mikulov from the 14th century and after the expulsion of the Jews from Vienna in 1671 the existing number of 146 registered Jewish families in Mikulov increased by further 80 families. At the so-called Rabbi Hill (Rabinenplatz) the majority of local Rabbis with other members of the family are buried (Fig. 4). The oldest preserved tombstone of Mikulov is the tombstone of Rabbi Judah Leib Eulenburg (1618, Fig. 5). Buried close to him is another significant Rabbi and cabbalist, Pentahiah ben Joseph (1637). His tombstone is decorated with the relief of a book and a Torah crown, both symbols of scholars.

A significant Jewish centre from the late Middle Ages was Holešov. After the middle of the 19th century Holešov became the seat of the land Moravian rabbinate for a short time. The well-known Rabbi Sabbatai ben Meir ha-Kohen, known as Shakh (Fig. 6), was buried here in 1662. He came from Lithuania from where he escaped the exterminatory pogroms. At the end of his life he was active in Holešov in the capacity of Rabbi and taught Talmud there at *jeshiva*. At the local cemetery the idea to bury Rabbis under tombs



Fig. 7 The tombstone of Jacob Bassevi von Treuenburg, 1634, Jewish Cemetery in Mladá Boleslav (photo: Iva Steinová 2010)



*Fig. 8 The tombstone of Menahem Leidesdorfer, 1809/1810, Jewish Cemetery in Luže (photo: Iva Steinová 2010)*

was introduced and the first of them was exactly the tomb of Rabbi Shakh. The Shakh Synagogue in Holešov, a Renaissance building featuring remarkable Baroque paintings with liturgical texts inside, was named after the rabbi.

Buried under Jewish tombstones that have been preserved in our territory are also other personalities known from the history of the country. At the cemetery in Mladá Boleslav Jacob Bassevi of Treuenburg, the Court Jew of Rudolph II Habsburg and banker of three Czech Kings, was buried in 1634 (Fig. 7). He was the first Jew in the territory of the Czech lands in 1622 to be ennobled by Ferdinand II and to gain the coat-of-arms. He was a marked builder: in Prague in the Old Town he built a palace, financed the construction of the synagogue and hospital and extended the ghetto. At that time, as a member of the consortium that gained the monopoly for the minting of coins, he participated in a considerable devaluation of the currency at that time, which led to the state's bankruptcy. Jacob Bassevi lost the confidence of the ruler, escaped under the protection of Duke Albrecht von Wallenstein and conducted his transactions at the estates in Frýdlant and in Jičín. He died in the same year as Duke Albrecht, who was murdered at the order of the ruler in Cheb in 1634. Jacob Bassevi escaped from Jičín to Mladá Boleslav, where he was buried.

Buried at Jewish cemeteries in Bohemia and in Moravia are also Jews who did not live there but for various reasons moved to our territory before their death. A spectacular mar-

ble tombstone with the symbols of the eagle, sceptre and crown can be found at the cemetery in the east-Bohemian town of Luže. It belongs to Menahem Leidesdorfer (Fig. 8) who died there in 1809. The family came from Nassau, later they lived in Bratislava and in Vienna where the father of Menahem, Markus, engaged in transactions with the state at the time of the Napoleonic wars. He became the supplier of army hospitals and his son Menahem was obviously also personally involved in these activities. Despite the fact that no more sources have been preserved about the fate of Menahem, it is evident that he died far from home from an infectious disease. He died several years before his father Markus was ennobled. Nonetheless, the epitaph of Menahem presents the title "von Leidesdorfer".

Jewish cemeteries became the last resting place also for Jews who came to Bohemia for a cure. West Bohemia is an area famous for balneology. Before the foundation of local cemeteries the Jewish visitors to Mariánské Lázně and Karlovy Vary were buried in Drmoul, Chodová Planá and Hroznětín. The cemetery in Drmoul, located on the hill to the west of the village, is hidden in the middle of the forest. This extremely impressive cemetery, the oldest tombstones of which originate from the end of the 17th century, amazes by its special atmosphere and a considerable number of typologically interesting tombstones with unique decoration. In the left part of the cemetery there is the tombstone for Jehiel Michl Elkich decorated in the upper part by a bas-relief of the Kohens' blessing by hand and crown of priesthood. Michl came from Polish Gdansk and in 1846 went to Mariánské Lázně to cure his ill heart. However, after one month he died there.

Similar was also the fate of the Moravian land Rabbi Mordecai Benet (Fig. 9). In 1829 his health condition deteriorated so much that he decided to leave Mikulov for Karlovy Vary to "drink water from its wells", as his tombstone describes. However, in summer 1829 he succumbed to his disease and was buried at the cemetery in Hroznětín. At his wish, after seven months his body was transferred by his sons to Mikulov "so that he might be laid among the graves of his family". Mordecai Benet is considered one of the most significant figures in the Jewish history of Moravia and his grave in Mikulov is a place of pilgrimage for Jews from all over the world. His original Mikulov tombstone bears the symbol of the Torah crown held by two lions. The new tombstone that was made at the beginning of the 20th century is without decorative symbols (Fig. 10).

Tombstones with iconographically unique decoration are located especially at the cemeteries in Ivančice and in Šafov. In Ivančice the Jewish settlement is documented reliably to the late Middle Ages and tombstones at the local cemetery have been the preserved since the end of the 16th century. In Šafov Jews only started to settle in the second half of the 17th century and the oldest tombstones at the cemetery originate from the first half of the 18th century.

The last cemetery we will mention in this paper is the one in Třebíč. The Jewish settlement of Třebíč is first documented in the mid-15th century and in Moravia it was one of the largest settlements. At the end of the 18th century Jews were the majority of the town's population with 59% of all inhabitants. The Jewish cemetery with more than



Fig. 9 Portrait of Rabbi Mordecai Benet (Marcus Benedict), first quarter of 19th century (photo: archive of the Jewish Museum in Prague)



Fig. 10 New Tombstone for Mordecai Benet, 1908, Jewish Cemetery in Mikulov (photo: Iva Steinová 2009)

2000 tombstones is an extensive and well preserved document of activity of the local community. In Třebíč significant families from different parts of Europe met. From the local remarkable personalities we have selected the members of the Bachrach and Lemberg families. The Bachrach family belonged to the newcomers from Vienna after Jews were expelled in 1671. Standing out among its members is Jacob ben Moses David Bachrach, buried in Třebíč in 1704. He was the grandson of Judah Leib Bachrach who headed the Viennese Jewish community in the mid-17th century. On his tomb Jacob is presented as a scholar with the Rabbi title at an honorary place among the five most significant personalities named immediately after the current Rabbi.

The second significant family from the eastern part of Europe was the Lwów Lemberg family from Lemberg (Lviv) in Galicia. Its most significant representatives included the Moravian Head land Rabbi Moses ben Aaron Lwów Lemberg, buried in Mikulov in 1757 and his brother, Joseph ben Aaron Lemberg, Rabbi in Třebíč where he died in 1775.

The Jewish quarter of Třebíč with two synagogues is among the best preserved ghettos in Europe and represents an exceptionally valuable ensemble from the town-planning point of view. Together with the Romanesque basilica and the Jewish cemetery it became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2003. The tombstones preserved in situ are among

the most endangered cultural monuments, they are exposed to unfavourable weather and are often subject to vandalism. Their condition depends, inter alia, on the material of which they were made. In recent years, in the territory of the Czech Republic not only a systematic care and maintenance of cemeteries has been developed, but attention is also paid to the documentation of their tombstones. Collected gradually and studied are archival documents containing the registration of the burials that were performed by local *Chevrá kadisha* associations. Despite all care, a number of Jewish tombstones are subject to irreversible changes. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to document the tombstones completely, which proves to be a challenge for the next years. The detailed documentation is important for the future, because a time may come when it will only be possible to study tombstones from photographs.

### Zusammenfassung

#### Jüdische Friedhöfe und Bestattungskultur in der Tschechischen Republik

Über 350 jüdische Friedhöfe mit Zehntausenden von Grabmälern befinden sich auf dem Territorium der Tschechischen Republik, die meisten davon in der Verantwortung jüdischer

Organisationen, nur wenige in kommunaler oder öffentlicher Regie. In den letzten zwanzig Jahren haben sich das Erscheinungsbild und der Erhaltungszustand jüdischer Friedhöfe dank des Engagements der Verantwortlichen erheblich verbessert. Teilweise haben sich auf den Friedhöfen noch die historischen Einrichtungen mit originalen Steinplatten für rituelle Reinigungen (Tahara) erhalten.

Die weitaus überwiegende Mehrheit der jüdischen Grabsteine zeigt die Form einer Stele in ashkenasischer Tradition. Seltener haben sich Grabsteine über Gräbern von Rabbinern, Gelehrten, Kaufleuten und Repräsentanten der Jüdischen Gemeinden und ihren Frauen seit dem 17. Jahrhundert erhalten. Einzigartig ist wohl das Zeugnis eines liegenden sephardischen Grabsteins auf dem Friedhof in Třešť aus der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Für Ostböhmen sind zur Wende vom 18. zum 19. Jahrhundert asymmetrische Grabsteine charakteristisch. Polnische Grabsteintypen finden sich in der Gegend um Osoblaha (Schlesien) in Nordost-Tschechien. Viele jüdische Grabmäler waren aus Holz und haben sich – teilweise auch als Museumsobjekte – erstaunlich gut erhalten.

Grabinschriften waren bis Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts in hebräischer Schrift. Die ältesten Steine stammen aus dem 13. und 14. Jahrhundert, sie sind allerdings nicht in situ, sondern meist in Zweitverwendung eingemauert überliefert. Die ältesten am historischen Standort erhaltenen Grabsteine stehen auf Friedhöfen in Prag und Kolín, weitere aus dem 16. Jahrhundert auf einigen Begräbnisplätzen in Böhmen und Mähren. Aus dem 17. Jahrhundert stammen etwa 50 Friedhöfe. Ihre Zahl sollte im 18. Jahrhundert weiter steigen und zeigt deutliche Unterschiede zwischen den Landesteilen Böhmen mit städtischen Großgemeinden und Mähren mit vielen verstreuten kleinen ländlichen Gemeinden. Erst im Zuge der Emanzipation sollte die Zahl jüdischer Friedhöfe in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts wieder deutlich zunehmen, meistens in der Nachbarschaft kommunaler Friedhöfe für christliche Glaubensangehörige. Große Friedhofsverwüstungen und -zerstörungen mit teilweise in die Tausende gehenden Verlusten an Grabsteinen brachten im 20. Jahrhundert die deutsche Besetzung und die kom-

unistische Vorherrschaft. Sowohl in Böhmen, etwa in der „Jüdischen Stadt“ Kolín nad Labem oder in Roudnice nad Labem, als auch auf traditionsreichen Friedhöfen in Mähren (Mikulov, Holešov, Mladá Boleslav) haben sich historisch und künstlerisch wertvolle Grabstellen von bedeutenden Persönlichkeiten der jüdischen Kultur und Geschichte erhalten, darunter auch von berühmten zugewanderten Familien wie der von Menahem Leidesdorfer im ostböhmisches Luže. Manche ausländischen Kurgäste fanden insbesondere im 19. Jahrhundert auch auf jüdischen Friedhöfen in den böhmischen Badeorten ihre letzte Ruhestätte.

Eine ikonographisch einzigartige Grabsteindekoration weisen die auf das 16. und 17. Jahrhundert zurückgehenden Friedhöfe in Ivančice und Šafov auf. Zu den ältesten, seit Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts nachgewiesenen jüdischen Siedlungen zählt Třebíč in Mähren, eine Stadt, in der Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts fast 60 Prozent aller Einwohner Juden waren und die zeitweilig einen Treffpunkt für jüdische Familien (Bachrach, Lemberg) aus allen Teilen Europas bildete. Einige Grabinschriften sind auf deutsch in hebräischen Lettern eingraviert. Der Friedhof wurde 2003 mit zwei erhaltenen Synagogen und dem größten jüdischen Viertel Tschechiens und einem der besterhaltenen Ghettos in Europa in die UNESCO-Welterbeliste eingetragen.

#### **Bibliography**

- Jan HEŘMAN, *Židovské hřbitovy v Čechách a na Moravě / Jewish Cemeteries in Bohemia and in Moravia*, Prague 1980.
- Jiří FIEDLER, *Židovské památky v Čechách a na Moravě / Jewish Monuments in Bohemia and Moravia*, Prague 1992.
- Jaroslav KLENOVSKÝ, *Židovské památky Moravy a Slezska / Jewish Monuments of Moravia and Silesia*, Brno 2001.
- Blanka ROZKOŠNÁ, Pavel JAKUBEC, *Židovské památky Čech / Jewish Monuments of Bohemia*, Brno 2004.
- Iva STEINOVÁ, Maceva. *Židovský náhrobek a symbolika jeho výzdoby ve světle tradice / Matzeva. The Jewish Tombstone and the Symbolism of its Decoration in the Light of Tradition*, Prague 2011 (in print).