

MEMORIAL RECORD in celebration of the 60th Anniversary
of the Foundation of the Temple of the
1865 - 1925 Hebrew Congregation of Friedek-Mistek

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The entrance hall to our Synagogue in Friedek-Mistek bears three marble wall plaques dedicated to the lasting memory of the founders and benefactors of this House of God. To tell their story and thereby to justify their endeavours, is the purpose of this memoir, composed on the 60th Anniversary of the Temple's foundation.

The first plaque, installed on the 40th anniversary of the foundation, immortalises the 33 men whose sacrifices, determination and courage, culminated in the establishment of this venue.

Its origin was a tiny and insignificant assembly of Jews from either side of the River Ostravitza who had met at first to form a Minyan, later to grow into a congregation. That Jewish community was liable to consist of relatively recent arrivals, Jews having been barred from settling in the area prior to 1848. The Jews of Silesia were restricted to 119 families and were allowed to form only 3 religious communities, namely in the Moravian enclave of Hotzenplotz in Western Silesia, and in Teschen and Bielitz in Eastern Silesia. In Moravia Jews were permitted only in some small urban and rural communities where they had been settled for centuries, segregated in a few dingy narrow lanes. The number of permitted Jewish marriages was severely limited to prevent an increase in the Jewish population.

The town of Mistek was closed to Jewish settlement until the 1860ies. Only in the adjoining villages of Kollaredov and Swiadnov had a few Jewish families - Lichtenstern, Samueli, Bloch and others - been allowed to settle. The first Jew permitted to live within the urban area of Mistek was Markus Brenner, the only one of the 33 names on the plaque who lived to see the Temple's 60th Anniversary (though we mourn his recent passing in his 93rd year.)

The situation was more favourable in Friedek whose population and town council were less intolerant towards Jewish settlement. Thus it had a number of Jewish citizens well before the March-1849 Constitution granted equal rights and freedom of movement to all Jews. We know that the Munk family came to Friedek more than 100 years ago to live peacefully and unhampered, indeed highly respected, amongst its Gentile neighbours. The measure of respect accorded to this Jewish family may be gleaned from the fact that the funeral cortege of its senior member, Josef Munk, was accompanied by the ringing of church bells.

However, opportunities for commerce or industry in the town were few during the first half of the 19th Century and its Jewish population remained small in numbers. Only at the onset of the industrial revolution, with the change-over of textile production from manual to mass factory production and the resulting lively development of trade, did a substantial number of Jews settle in the town. Here it must be mentioned that Friedek's industrial rise was in no small measure due to the enterprise and unflagging energy of its Jewish citizens of whom the Landsbergers, Munks and Neumanns, as leading industrialists, deserve special mention.

The first Minyan which became the forerunner of our congregation had its seat in Kolloredow, to-day part of Mistek, but then a village along the Reichstrasse halfway between Friedek and Mistek. The first meeting place of the group was a member's living room, later there was a separate prayer room with Bima and Ark, scrolls and eternal light, and finally, a 'Beth Hak'nesseth', a Shul, was established in rented premises with separate areas for men and women. This was located in the 'Bykovna', an inn in Kolloredow now part of the Löw property, until it was moved to the opposite shore of the Ostravitza on Friedek territory, then back again to Kolloredow to the house now owned by the Herliczka family. For years, the only paid functionary, Isaak Fried, acted as Chazan and Shochet.

There exists a yellowed old document written in German in Hebrew lettering with an admixture of Hebrew words (undated but evidently originating from the first half of last century) listing 12 paragraphs of regulations (t'kanot v'hinbagot) of the 'Beth Hak'nesseth in the village of Kolloredov'.

By the eighteen-sixties which brought increased trade and industry to the Friedek area, its sister town of Mistek soon began to participate in the new prosperity. Jewish entrepreneurs were arriving from Silesia (Landsberger, Neumann, Ripper), from Moravia (Münster, Tauber), from Slovakia (Kuffler, Sofer) and from Galicia. Several large textile mills were set up by Jewish industrialists and soon prospered. The spirit and liqueur manufacture of Herrmann Löw, who - the scion of a highly respected Jewish family - had come to Kolloredov in 1855, had likewise prospered. Friedek had a Jewish doctor (Ziffer), a Jewish miller (Fried) and a Jewish brewer (Kolban). The Jews were enjoying equal rights and respect and held considerable commercial and social standing.

The foregoing will serve to illustrate how closely the development of the two sister towns was bound up with the rise of their Jewish communities, and how what was originally a loose, small gathering of co-religionists began to grow into a closely integrated congregation.

The main problem facing the community was the lack of any legal foundation. Membership was voluntary and contributions were insufficient to meet the manifold religious and social needs. Thus in 1861 there were only 28 paying members, whose contributions amounted to 23.10 Gulden, plus an extra 4.95 for support of the poor. The community's premises were ~~to~~ much too small to cater, as well as for regular services, for other needs such as cheder classes, funerals, and charitable purposes.

To find a solution for these problems, a meeting held on 28th September 1861 elected a Committee consisting of Philip Landsberger (chairman), Ignatz Munk, Gustav Münster, Samuel Samuely, and Herrmann Löw, with the following tasks:-

- 1) to establish a 'Kultusverein' (religious association) in accordance with Government regulations
- 2) to take measures for the erection of a purpose built house of prayers

A subsequent meeting held on 11th October 1862 agreed that the erection of a synagogue should be urgently pursued, and carried a majority decision that it should be located in Friedek rather than in Kolloredov.

On 23rd November 1863, Dr. Josef Ziffer (who had succeeded as Committee Chairman) reported that he had been successful in obtaining official sanction (by decree Z.12323 of the Silesian Provincial Government) for the establishment of the Friedek Hebrew Association whose aims were cited in its statutes:-

- a) to provide religious instruction for Jewish youth
- b) the orderly exercise of communal religious services
- c) the raising of funds for erecting a synagogue, for the founding and upkeep of ritual institutions, and educational and charitable activities for the benefit of the Jewish inhabitants of Friedek, Kolloredov, Mistek and surrounding areas.

The district Rabbi of Teschen was to remain responsible for the supervision of services and religious instruction of the new congregation, in return for a fee paid to the Teschen community.

The first general meeting of the newly-constituted Association was held on 17th January 1864. The building of the Temple remained the main subject for discussion, the first task being to find a suitable site. It was to be in Friedek, yet in easy reach of Kolloredov (there were few Jews living in Mistek then)

The Committee petitioned the Teschen estate management of the Archduke Albert for the lease or sale of a garden site on the steep incline leading from Friedek to Kolloredov. The generous Archduke offered to provide a plot "measuring 600 klafters" entirely free of charge.

Thus it came to pass that the Friedek Temple proudly rose in a commanding, lofty position in beautiful grounds, rather than amongst tenements and shops in some crowded lane as in many other towns. The Archducal Estate gave further assistance in supplying interest-free credit for the purchase of building timber.

This is why the second plaque in the synagogue entrance hall gratefully remembers the generosity of its high-born benefactor and co-founder.

The acquisition of the site accomplished, the committee faced a new obstacle. The Friedek municipality, normally so proud of its tolerance, lodged an official objection to the proposed location of the Temple by reason of its closeness to the Pilgrims' Church of the Holy Mary - situated only some 100 yards away on the opposite hill and a popular venue for annual religious processions. These usually took place on Saturdays posing the danger of a clash with Jewish worshippers leading to religious conflict. The municipality was anxious to avoid the impression of religious prejudice and even offered to assist in providing an alternative site. At the same time they expressed surprise at the choice of Friedek as the venue in view of the fact that only eight of the town's Jewish families possessed permanent citizen status (the others having only temporary residence permits).

Happily, the Provincial Government rejected the municipality's objections, and time proved the fears on which they were based - no matter how well-meaning the motives - to be unjustified.

The late Summer of 1864 saw the solemn laying of the Temple's foundation stone, and building began under Architect Zapletal from Frenstat. Members of the Congregation were closely involved in the conduct of building activities. They handled the financial aspects, the ordering of materials and weekly wages to bricklayers, joiners and labourers. Members who owned horses and carts, provided transport for building materials. Raising the necessary capital was a great worry. Only part of the 100 shares issued for the purpose had been purchased by members and the Committee had approached business contacts and acquaintances with only limited success. Travel papers issued to Messrs Gustav Münster and Herrmann Löw by the Friedek Municipality dated 15th March 1864 certified the purpose of their journey as "the collection of voluntary donations towards the cost of the officially sanctioned house of prayers in Friedek". When this effort, too, failed to raise

sufficient funds, a loan of 1500 Gulden had to be raised from the Teschen Savings Bank, supplemented by individual members issuing bills of exchange to raise further credits from private sources.

The building proceeded speedily during 1865 and stood completed by the first half of September. The following is a description from that period: -

'The new House of God rises at a 10 metre distance from the street, separated by wrought-iron railings, its narrow front facing forward. It is not a powerful or ostentatious building but impresses the eye by its tasteful simplicity of style. The pleasing façade is crowned by the tablets bearing the commandments and the Hebrew inscription "seh haschaar laadonai". A tall double oak door leads to the vestibule, with stairs to the women's gallery on the left, the robing room for the Cantor and choir on the right. A second tall door leads to the main body of the Temple, a bright high-ceilinged chamber seating 200 worshippers, lit by six high arched windows. To the rear, resting on graceful columns, the women's gallery, at the front 3 steps leading to the half-circle forming the Bima lit from above by a rosette of three stained-glass windows and containing a reading desk, two carved candelabra, a lamp housing the eternal light and, up 3 more steps, the Holy Ark.'

The building was executed in Roman style. It occupied appr. 300 square metres. The building costs, not counting materials and services contributed free of charge, amounted to little more than 20,000 Gulden.

On 14th September 1865, 8 days before Rosh Hashanah 5626, the new House of God was solemnly consecrated in the presence of official representatives of the provincial Government and local municipalities and many guests from other Jewish communities. Heading a solemn procession from the Chairman's House, the District Rabbi, walking under a canopy, carried a Scroll to the door of the Temple. Simultaneously, a second procession, formed by members of the Kolloredov congregation, arrived with the remaining scrolls, for a ceremonial handing-over of the key. The District Chairman then addressed the gathering. A text of his speech, voicing sentiments of true tolerance, has been preserved. It ended with the words:

'May the spirit of unity and love of humanity prosper in this House....., and may its halls echo not with wailings but with prayers of thanks.

The congregation and official guests then proceeded into the synagogue, the scrolls were carried to the bima and placed in the Ark behind the sumptuous, gold-embroidered curtains donated by the congregation's ladies' guild. The Rabbi lit the eternal light, to begin the service of consecration.

The third memorial plaque bears the inscription:

'To our revered Chairman, Mr Herrmann Löw, in recognition of 50 years of untiring and felicitous service. The blossoming and vigour of our Jewish community is personified in this second incumbent to the arduous office of Head of the Community. In Herrmann Löw, the love of Judaism and a selfless capacity for tireless devotion in its service was combined with unflagging energy and clear, intelligent vision. These qualities enabled him, during the 28 years he served as Chairman (1878 to 1906) to develop and improve the Congregation's existing institutions and to add and create new facilities as and when the need arose. The following achievements are closely linked with his name:-

The Jewish Cemetery. Up to 1882 Jewish funerals had to make the long journey to Teschen. Efforts to find a suitable local site had been frustrated by the unwillingness of owners to sell their grounds for such a purpose. In 1880 the brewer Ignatz Kolban managed to purchase a large field along the road to Dobrau for the sum of 1400 Gulden which he sold on at the same price to the Congregation. Permission for use of the site as a cemetery was eventually obtained from the Friedek Municipality. A prayer hall and mortuary were built, with an adjoining cottage for a warden. The first grave was that of Ernestine Goldstein of Mistek, buried on 10th October 1882.

New Constitution. New statutes drawn up by the Ministry for Religious Affairs and eventually approved by the regional Government of Silesia, had the effect of regularising the legal status of Jewish religious congregations subject to certain stringent conditions (such as a democratic election of the governing board). It had long been Löw's most ardent wish to introduce such measures which would also empower the "Kultusgemeinde" (religious council) as it was to be known in the future, to raise taxes from members of the congregation rather than voluntary contributions, thus establishing a secure financial basis. However, the first elections in May 1896 led to conflict and stalemate. An appeal procedure led to a second poll in February 1896.

The first governing board, the executive organ of the newly formed "Kultusgemeinde" consisted of Herrmann Löw as Chairman, Leopold Paneth as Deputy Chairman, and Salomon Tauber, Mathias Schwarz and Alois Reik as officers. Thus the little Minyan, which Löw had joined 40 years earlier, had grown into a prestigious organisation.

Extension of the Temple. The synagogue building which had been accomplished under such sacrifices barely 30 years earlier was no longer adequate for a growing congregation. The newly elected Board therefore decided to commission an extension and complete renovation. This included two additional wings

for the women's gallery and the installation of an organ at gallery level. A new panelled ceiling was raised to loft height and 2 round windows were added at the higher level. Shining electric lights were substituted for the original candles, all this transforming the interior. A second staircase gave access to the gallery and 2 extra rest rooms for cantors and rabbis were provided at the rear.

On Rosh Hashana 5654 (1893) the congregation assembled for the first time to the sounds of organ music accompanying the New Year prayers, so movingly recited by Cantor Salomon Weiss.

Chevra Kadisha. The constitution of a formal charity and burial society in 1896, its aim "to practise neighbourly love towards the living and the dead", was another achievement long cherished and furthered by Herrmann Löw. He was unanimously elected its honorary president in 1904.

The Women's Charitable Society. The establishment of the Women's Society in 1898 was another milestone. **Fanny Löw**, wife of our Chairman and universally loved for her charity and goodness, became its first president.

The Schoolhouse and Community Hall. As far back as 1870 the idea of building a schoolhouse had been mooted. To this purpose the archducal ground landlord was persuaded to exchange part of the sloping site at the rear of the Temple against an adjoining plot. In the same year, a building committee headed by Philip Landsberger was charged with preparations for the project, the procurement of materials, etc. Plans were commissioned from the Architect of the Temple while the finance committee was instructed to raise the necessary finance. However, for a variety of reasons the project had to be abandoned. Again in 1887, there were plans for building a school with accommodation for a teacher which fell through in the face of strong opposition from some committee members who held that the costs would be too great a burden. Thus the school project continued to hang fire until 1898, when a full assembly of the congregation voted in favour of a proposal that a schoolhouse and communal hall be built in celebration of the 50th Jubilee of Emperor Franz Josef's reign.

On December 2nd, the day of the Jubilee, the foundation stone was laid on a newly acquired site to the right of the Temple (not where originally planned). The completed building was roomy enough to accommodate two class-rooms and the requisite sanitary provision, as well as a large conference room and office, a comfortable flat for a Rabbi, and a basement flat for a school-keeper. At the back, there was a large school playground and playing field, and a school garden.

The School assumed its function in September 1900 at the start of the school year. It was consecrated by the congregation's first own Rabbi, Dr. Juda Bergmann, to the great joy and satisfaction of our Chairman.

For half a century until his death in January 1906 at the age of 77 Herrmann Löw watched over, and devoted himself to the welfare of Friedek-Mistek Jewry. His leadership was that of a patriarch, of a loving and caring father, and like a father, he was loved and respected. His achievements have remained a lasting memorial in the hearts of his Jewish fellow citizens.

Friedek-Mistek is to-day amongst the few Jewish congregations in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia to retain its Jewish school inspite of burgeoning assimilation, and despite the 1918 political changes, high running costs and a diminishing number of pupils.

We stand at the threshold of a new age. The dreadful world-war has brought about momentous political and social changes. Our "Kultusgemeinde" is now part of the Czechoslovak Republic, a democratic and free society. In this new State, we Jews no longer depend on the protection and tolerance of individuals. We now enjoy full equality as citizens, and the unfettered right, the human right, to practise our religion and to acknowledge our origins without fear of persecution.

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Translator's Postscript.

The Jewish School, which I attended from 1925-29, was closed down the year I left, for lack of Jewish children. Their parents had migrated to the cities - to Vienna before 1918, later to Prague, Brno and neighbouring Ostrava. Thus of my grandfather Herrmann Löw's 9 children, only my father and youngest brother had remained in Mistek.

The Synagogue and School were burnt to the ground by local Nazis the day the Germans marched in on 14 March 1939. Most of the Jews of the two towns perished in concentration camps. A few survivors returned in 1945, but soon moved on to Israel, England or Australia.

There are no Jews living in Friedek-Mistek to-day. The Jewish cemetery, which lay untended and overgrown for many decades, is now being lovingly cared for by a Christian sect.

Katia Gould
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