

IN THE SHADOW OF FRYDEK SYNAGOGUE

By Jaromir Polasek

Recent European civilization has a lot in common with Jewish nation, including hundreds of thousands emigrants after WWII, if they survived, leaving for United States of America or Israel.

Shortly after WWII 52 Jewish religious communities were restored within our territory, during the first emigration wave in 1946-1947 26 000 Jews left mainly for new Israel, 18 000 Jews moved out of our republic before 1950 and last 6 000 Jews could leave Czechoslovakia in 1968-1969. Today there are about 5 000 people with Jewish heritage living in the Czech and Slovak Republic.

This article is supposed to reveal a bit of history of Jewish settlement in Frydek-Mistek area during 18. – 20. century which has never been published before.

Jews have been living on our territory since ever. Ralfalstat Customer and Shipping Order from 903-6 mentioned Jewish merchants who traded with local people. Also the report of Arabic-Jewish merchant Ibrahim Ibn Jakub, an ambassador of Chalif al Hakama II, who visited Slavic countries in 955-6 when Duke of Boleslav I was in power, mentioned a presence of Jewish merchants on Prague's market who settled around the Duke's castle. The report is included in "Books of journeys and countries" by famous Spanish-Arabic geographer Abu Obaida al-Bakri who died in 1094 in Cordoba. When he talks about Slavs he also mentions Czechs in several chapters. For a curiosity he mentioned that "population of Bujima is mostly with dark skin and black hair, on contrary a light type is rare".

Originally Jews living on our territory were free, and enjoyed the same rights as groups of Roman and Germanic merchants, they had their own self government, judicial system, and were predominantly engaged in a trade with natural products, furs, wax, grain, wool, fabrics, tin, but also with cattle, horses, and slaves, which not yet developed early feudal economy did not quite exploit yet. On the other hand they were importing into Bohemia exotic consumer products, expensive fabrics, jewelry, weapons, salt, and wine. From the list of privileges of Czech knight Sobeslav we can learn, that Jews are fully free. Izaak ben Moshe, also known as Izaak Or Zarua, who repeatedly lived in Prague in the first half of 13. century, uses old Czech for explanations of some more complicated terms for which Hebrew did not have a word, because "this is our language that we speak (-old Czech-). Somewhere here we can trace the origins of Czech Jews who hundreds years later at the time of transports into concentration camps did not speak Hebrew at all and who very often did not follow religious practices.

Persecution of Jews - and not only on our territory - has to be traced back to early Middle Ages. The IV. Lateran's (?) council in 1215 gradually banned Jews from owning agricultural land, working in agriculture and crafts, and severely reduced their rights. Jews were socially degraded and their contacts with Christians were limited, by decree they were forced to wear special cloths, disgraceful signs, and they were ordered to live

and do business in ghettos. At the last, they were allowed to loan money and charge interest, an activity which was at that time forbidden to Christians.

In 1727 was issued so called 'Family Law' according to which only the oldest son in the family was allowed to get married; children from illegal marriages were excluded from inheritance rights. So the Jewish population growth was severely slowed down. Similarly the total number of Jewish families that were allowed to settle in Bohemia was set to 8,541 and in Moravia to 5,106. (-Bohemia+Moravia+Silesia ~ today's Czech Republic-)

It was not until 1848 that Jews became equal to other people. Christians were opposing this process and fought it by large demonstrations and it took another 19 years before formal freedoms became real and Jews were able to freely settle, move, get married, and were allowed to acquire real estate and buy and sell land.

First Jews lived in Frydek at the beginning of the 18. century. They were able to take advantage of a favorable economic situation at Frydek estate during counts Prazma's rule. Gradually a large Jewish community was established in Frydek, and only few Jews lived in Mistek. Later a larger Jewish community lived in newly founded Colloredow (Koiloredov). In the revision report dated March 9, 1723, Moyses Lieberman Munck was the first Jewish entrepreneur in Frydek. His German name was probably not very old and reflected common practice of that era to convert first and last names into German names. Formal mandatory policy about names was issued later in 1787, when it was ordered that Jews have to acquire permanent German last name and one from a list of 109 boys and 35 girls names permitted by the decree.

Moyses Lieberman is first mentioned on October 30, 1708 in a document written by the owner of Frydek estate Frantisek Vilem Count Prazma. Moyses Lieberman had requested a permission to live permanently in Frydek and he also intended to buy a house there. Frantisek Vilem approved his request under following conditions: purchase of the house is approved only for Moyses Lieberman and his family, the owner of the house is not allowed to let another Jew to spend a night in the house, and he will not allow foreign Jews to practice any trade, only Moyses Lieberman himself is allowed to have a display showing his goods. Moyses Lieberman later acquired family name Munck (Munk). Unlike in Bohemia and Moravia, Jews in Silesia were in exceptional situations being allowed to buy real estate.

Munk took advantage of a moment and from the rulers of Frydek rented, probably on Slezska Street, toll station and also opened a bar, that possibly has been connected with a pub "At the Toll Station" ("U myta", Na Slezske, U kriveho psa). Little later on February 19, 1711 Moyses Lieberman bought for 100 silesian tolaars a pub on the square in Frydek, the rights to serve alcoholic beverages he transferred on the city. Munk's son Nathan Lieberman bought in 1732 for 1,000 silesian tolaars a tobacco shop. Family Munk were the founders of a large Jewish population in Frydek-Mistek later. We do not have more detailed records of individual Jewish families from this era, they are not even listed in funeral records. Jews were buried in Jewish cemetery in Tesin, Rabbi was not allowed for such a small population.

Beginnings of a larger Jewish community date back to the half of the last century. According to an older decree 115 Jewish families were allowed to live in Silesia. Jews had religious organizations only in Osoblah, Bilsko, and Tesin. There were synagogues, and approved cemeteries. Disgraceful markings of cloths for Jews was abolished by Josef

II. Jews were now allowed to rent farms from landlords, practice crafts, later the Silesian government allowed Jews to settle with only their lords' permission.

Several new Jewish families settled in Frydek and Mistek after 1850. Until 1848 Jews were not allowed to live on Hukvaldy Arcibishop Estate, nevertheless several Jewish families lived at that time in Frydlant, Hukvaldy, Sviadnov, and foremost in Kolloredov. It is believed that they soon opened their first temple right there in Kolloredov, since it was situated somewhat away from Mistek, it was close to the old imperial road from Frydek, and its inhabitants were quickly acquiring German names and language. Their first shrine was probably in one of Jewish houses. Later on Jews from Sviadnov and Kolloredov rented one room in a restaurant in Kolloredov called "Bykovna (Bull House(?))", that used to stand on the Mistek side right after the wooden bridge over river Ostravice. Shortly after that local Jews gathered in a house of a man called Samuel in Colloredov. The first religious organization in Colloredov was voluntary. Jews paid their religious expenses from donations, that were not sufficient to cover schooling of Jewish children, funerals at the cemetery in remote Tesin, nor participation of a Rabbi during services.

Therefore on September 1861 they formed a new religious group; members of the board decided at their first meeting to build a permanent place of prayer, that would allow year round use. Then they started negotiations with Jews from Frydek which resulted into something totally unplanned. Jews from Kolloredov lost vote and it was decided that the house of prayer will be built in Frydek. On November 23, 1863 the civil administration approved the intention to build a synagogue, even though that the Jewish community did not have a convenient lot for its construction. Disagreements followed that resulted in a split among the members and a new plenary meeting was called on January 17, 1864, to establish a new organization. Dr. Josef Ziffer, a physician from Frydek, was elected its president, and was in this position until his death in 1878. A new application was submitted to the archduke's office in Tesin to permit construction of a new synagogue left of the imperial road next to St. Mary church. The owner of the land gave 600 sahs (1 sah =? square meter) of the garden. The mayor of Frydek strongly objected, respecting protests of irritated Christians. Local citizens supported by numerous pilgrims argued that the location of the new synagogue was inappropriate, because frequent processions on their way to St. Mary church would have to pass by. They also argued that only seven Jewish families were living permanently there and that their long term presence was not guaranteed, and that there were only eight companies either 100% Jewish or with Jewish co-ownership.

Construction of the synagogue was nevertheless approved and started already at the beginning of 1864. It was moving very fast, a lot of building material was donated, Jewish businesses provided transportation for free and also the original project was relatively simple. The construction was finished in just one year, and on September 14, 1865, Rabbi Samuel Friedman from Tesin initiated it for religious use. Final total cost reached 20,000 zloty (ducats).

Jewish communities of Frydek and Mistek were consolidated on March, 21 1890. At that time the older synagogue on "Drei Pruttekstrasse" Street was not sufficient any more, and builder Rudolf Aulegh was asked to design a project for its reconstruction. The reconstruction cost was 13,700 zloty. The synagogue after the reconstruction was in a

neoromanesque style, rectangular shape, and simple. It had a saddle roof with an accented front at the entrance of the building. The construction was finished in 1896.

We need to remember here the owner of Frydek Castle, Archduke Albrecht Habsburk, who is believed to participate as a co-founder of Frydek Synagogue. He donated a piece of land for it and donated money for its construction and reconstruction. When he died on July 4, 1895, a service was held for him in the synagogue. Similarly Archduke Bedrich (=Friedrich) Habsburg visited several times the synagogue, once with his spouse Isabelle and their daughters (on July-4-1895).

From January 10, 1896 Jewish community of Frydek became independent of Rabbi in Tesin (Teschen in German). Rabbi in Frydek lived in an Art Nouveau villa not far from the synagogue near the road to Kollaredov Bridge; Rabbi was performing religious services and supervised religious education. Juda Bergmann became the first Rabbi on August 15, 1900. His appointment got contested by civil offices (?) who were supporting Rabbi Dr. Leimdoerfer from Tesin. In contrary, the Jewish community did not want to do any changes because they already elected from two candidates, Juda Bergman and Loschwitz Morana. Finally, Dr. Juda Bergman, just 25 years old at that time, was overwhelmingly elected. After a ceremonial taking of the post he was allowed to practice Rabbi's post only for two years. He was replaced by Dr. Jakob Drobinsky from Croatia, who left after that for Vienna in 1914. Until the end of the war the post was vacant and in 1918 Dr. Jakob Spirea from Moravska Ostrava was elected.

The actual appearance of the synagogue in Frydek is unfortunately not documented. Only few photographs show the object from a large distance. After the synagogue was torn down at the beginning of the war, a mosaic floor with a symbol of a star has been preserved for a long time. Frydek Synagogue was used year round, a spacious prayer hall was not oriented in any particular direction. Regardless, the appearance of the synagogue conformed the reformed rite, its placement was according to the tradition.

In Stepnice Valley located behind the synagogue was a creek and there was also river Ostravice nearby. Therefore men could be relieved of their sins by throwing pieces of bread into the stream ("taslich") during Jewish New Year. In the front of the synagogue were Ten Commandments in stone with a Hebrew verse of Psalm. In the entrance hall was a ritual wash bowl ("kijor") for traditional washing of hands before the service; the floor of the temple was probably only symbolically lower than the ground. Approximate South West orientation of the hall ("almemor") (bima) was achieved by an elevated place surrounded by a railing, from where a reading from Torah was taking place. Scrolls with text of the first Books of Moyses in Hebrew was kept in "aron ha-kodes" – a container placed in a recess in the wall. Torah included Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri, and Deuteronomium. The container was covered by a decorative curtain ("Parochet"). (6th line from the bottom, page 49 of the original Czech text)

The synagogue was surrounded by a small garden in English style, with a number of remarkable trees and shrubs, from which only dying pine trees and one mulberry tree survived. An original surrounding framework of trimmed maples has been devastated. A bakery for making Passover bread and a ritual bath were located outside of the synagogue.

The very last days of the synagogue are little bit of a mystery. Synagogue survived the 'Crystal Night' from 9. to 10. November 1938, and in a strongly germanized Frydek also the first days of German occupation. According to eye witnesses it was set on fire during the night from June 13. to 14, 1939, by an extreme group of local Germans, particularly German youths. Names of some of them are known, unfortunately in this case it is better to keep it as a historical secret.

During the demolition of the synagogue also the commemorative plaques installed on Sept-23-1905 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the construction of the temple were destroyed. Three marble plaques were installed in the entrance hall; first was dedicated to the first donor of the building lot and generous supporter field marshal and Archduke Albrecht Habsburg.

The first independent Jewish school was established at the same time as the synagogue. In 1863 a religious group established a committee in charge of creation of a German school. A private single class school was opened beginning school year 1864/5, Josef Fischer was teaching there starting the fall semester. The first school was not granted the right to be public(?), and therefore students were obliged to pass an exam in a German public school, and only exams from Hebrew and Jewish religion were taken in their school. The second teacher was Max Reiser, who was fired two years later on the basis of disagreements with the administration, and he was for a short period of time replaced by Matej Schwartz. Since March-4-1871 the school was officially opened and certified. When teacher Josef Fischer moved out from the town, he was replaced by a new teacher Samuel Pollak. (...) (page 50 in the middle)

(a lot of details about the school, how many students, they took 2 hours of Czech...)

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An interesting chapter is the foundation and history of a Jewish cemetery in Frydek on Slezska Street. First records of an intention to open a Jewish cemetery are dated between years 1864-80. All these attempts were unsuccessful because Jews did not own a suitable piece of land. The religious regulations were very strict: immediately after the death a dead body was taken on a special carriage to the closest cemetery. Jews from Frydek, Mistek, and Kolloredov were assigned to bury their dead in what is today Polish Tesin. In the morque members of a special funeral brotherhood "chevra kadischa" performed ritual washing of the body called "tahara", that had to be done using hot water. It is why a Jewish morque was easily distinguishable from a Christian morque because it had a chimney and a bowl (vessel) to heat water. The dead body was dressed up and displayed and untill the time of the funeral was guarded by the members of the brotherhood.

Ignac Kolben purchased a building lot from the heritage of late Josef Koltsch for 1,400 zloty in 1880 and donated it to Jewish community. Despite strong protests of owners of surrounding properties the establishment of Jewish cemetery was authorized. The lot was surrounded by a brick wall with a concrete crown, a new morque was built and a hall to perform ceremonies, and on Oct-10-1882 Ernestina Goldstein was the first one to be buried here. Her grave is still there. During German occupation some tomb stones were taken no one knows where, according to witnesses and some traces in what is today an empty part of the cemetery. Other graves survived the war and also years after

the war when no one paid any attention to the cemetery. Last funerals took place here in early fifties. Some tombstones were recently vandalized, and the central tomb of entrepreneurs Neumanns was robbed of valuable stone, and possibly in two or three other cases family tombs were robbed as well. Jewish community in Ostrava is today the owner of the cemetery, they have not done any changes here. The cemetery became in its more deserted section a gathering place for young people and became a public dump. The ceremonial hall was reconstructed by Adventists for their ceremonies.

There were 429 Jews counted in Frydek district in 1921, and only 307 seven years later. Similarly in Mistek District the number of Jews declined from 303 to 242 in the same period. During their highest numbers, Jews accounted for 2% of the total population. An immediate decline in their numbers was a result of their moving to big cities, where they had better opportunities to do business, and where their willingness to provide money for Jewish community declined, and there was a lack of Jewish youth.

Some other numbers: population of Jews in other cities and localities....

Before 1848 Jews were not allowed in Mistek to buy real estate and to settle there, despite that they lived here in a relatively large numbers. In 1856 a Jew Hermann Loew (later a founder of a famous liquere) bought in Kolloredov Altman's harenda' (=pub). In 1860 traditional manual domestic production of fabrics is replaced by a machine production in factories.

description of manufacturing and social consequences – Jews controlled a big part of textile industry.

--- a detailed description of different firms with names, acquisitions etc...

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Almost no materials are available to shed more light on the destiny of Jews in Frydek-Mistek during WW2. After September-30-1938 cca. 25,000 Jews ran from the border region into the central parts of Bohemia. Most of them continued their escape to other countries. They were swayed to leave also by the Crystal Night (9-10 Oct 1938) during which at least 35 synagogues were burned in Sudeten and countless Jewish graves were vandalized. If 117,551 Jews lived in the Czech Republic in 1930, after the declaration of independent Slovak State where 90,000 Jews lived, and Zakarpatska Ukraine where 102,500 Jews stayed, there were 118,000 Jews left in Protektorat Boehmen und Moehren after March-15-1939.

Frydek Synagogue was attacked at night of 13-14. June 1939 by a group of German fanatics, who prayed open the main entrance, demolished the furnishings inside, stole some, and then set the synagogue on fire. It burned down to the ground, and was later leveled. Jews in Frydek had to mark their businesses and they were immediately fired from their jobs in bigger industrial firms. Nazi confidants gradually took over everything.

Every Jew was stamped a record in their personal documents and they were discriminated almost immediately. Their bank accounts were blocked, and they were expelled from hospitals, law firms, they were not allowed to be out in the streets after 8 PM, after rations were established they could buy food only in special shops. Then they were forbidden to move from one place to another, to travel, to use public transport, their property was confiscated as well as all valuables, they were banned from going to public fairs, forests, parks, swimming pools, and to certain streets. Jews were not allowed to have a radio, to read a newspaper, to use a telephone. Beyond ration they could not buy fruits, sugar, cheese, fish, game, eggs, poultry, meat, beans, candy, wine, spirits, onion, garlic, tobacco, and shaving soap.

From September-1 1941 all Jews were ordered to wear on the left side of chest a yellow star and a label "Jude". Despite a shortage of written documentation there is a good chance that new discoveries about what happened to Jews during the war will be made.

The last paragraph (page 59):

"According to incomplete records from the period immediately after the war, the victims believe, that more than 280 Jews from Frydek-Mistek region were sent most often to concentration camps in Osviecim (Auschwitz) and Terezin (Teresien Stadt). Only 15 Jews returned after the war, some of them due to the suffering they were exposed to died, other emigrated to another country, and some returned from emigration. Shortly after the war the Frydek Jewish community could not therefore be restored."