

Jewish Traveler

By GABRIEL LEVENSON

With the just-released announcement that the Jews of Czechoslovakia will observe their thousand years in the country with a Millennium Celebration from July 10 to 13, many American Jews bound for Europe or Israel this summer will revise travel schedule to include a week's stopover in Prague.

When I was there recently reporting on the conditions of the Jewish community, I found the old Jewish Quarter itself had literally been converted into a museum, with the largest collection of Judaica in the world. The Czech Jewish populations was, proportionately, hardest hit by the Nazi terror: only five percent survived. Many left for Israel after the country's liberation in 1945, and there were not enough observant Jews remaining to fill the half-dozen magnificent synagogues concentrated within a few blocks of one another.

One, the Altneu (Old-Neu) Synagogue, is still used by worshippers for daily minvans, for the Sabbath and for the holidays. It is the oldest in Europe -- built in 1870 -- in the Gothic style, but with the usual four supporting buttresses replaced by five, lest there be any association with the Cross! The other five have been completely restored by the Czech government and are used as ex-

hibit halls for the State Jewish Museum.

The Nazis had systematically looted all the synagogues of Czechoslovakia and transported to Prague hundreds of thousands of items, some dating back to the first Jewish settlement in the city. Torahs, Torah covers embroidered in gold, jeweled Torah crowns, silver Kiddish cups and pointers and spiceboxes, hand-illuminated manuscripts . . . all were brought to Prague where the Germans planned to set up a "Museum of an Extinct Race" . . . the Jews; They enlisted the skills of hundreds of Jewish scholars from all over Europe, to catalogue and organize the materials. They seduced these prisoners with the dream of performing the useful task of preserving one thousand years of Czech Jewish history, and they promised them freedom when the work was done.

But when they learned men had completed their labors, and the Allied armies of liberation were closing in on the city -- the Third Army of GENERAL Patton from West and the Russians under Marshall Konev from the East -- then the Nazis rewarded their victims, the cream of European Jewish scholarship -- with the firing-squad, the gallows, and the gas chamber. Not one of the devoted workers who had slaved over the project was spared.

Their efforts, fortunatley, survive them, in te complex of beautifully rehabilitated synagogues in which this unparalleled collection of Jewish religious and secular art is displayed.

Together with this affirmation of life, there is the grim reminder of death. One of the buildings, the Pinkas Synagogue, has permanently inscribed on its walls the names of 77,289 victims of the Hitler terror -- Czech Jews from the provinces of Bohemia and Maravia. Another building, the former meeting place of the old Jewish burial society, now houses an exhibit of work by Jewish artists and writers who died in the concentration camp of Terezin (Theresienstadt); most touching is the display of poems and drawings by the children of Terezin -- only one hundred of whom survived out of the 15,000 who had been imprisoned there.

Back of this exhibit is the old Jewish cemetery -- a few dozen square yards containing more than 12,000 graves -- layers ten deep in some instances, so crowded is the area! The earliest known tomb is that of Avigdor Karo, dated 1439. The most frequently visited is that of Rabbi Yehunda Loew ben Bezalel -- the Maharal -- who died in 1609 and was one of the great scholars of the Czech Renaissance. He is best known, of course, as the reputed creator of the Golem -- that figure moulded out of clay into which the Maharal breathed life with the aid of a holy parchment that he inserted in the creature's

mouth.

The Jewish traveler can write his wish on a slip of paper and insert it into a crack in Rabbi Loew's tombstone. Perhaps it will be granted -- so strongly does th spirit of the seer permeate the old ghetto. If the traveler then walks 100 yards down a little street he can pray in the Altneu Synagogue, where the Maharal's chair, his talith and his tefillin are still preserved, just as he left them almost 400 years ago.

After prayer, a visitor can walk across the narrow alley which separates the synagogue from the Ghetto's 400-year-old Town Hall. A clock atop the building tells the time accurately -- with Hebrew letters on its face instead of the usual Roman or Arabic numerals. As a proper Hebrew clock should, this one runs backwards -- its hands moving counter-clockwise, from right to left, like a page of Hebrew.

The Town Hall offers a Kosher Sabbath dinner. The full-course repast costs seven Czech crowns (about 42¢) Tea (in a glass) and apple strudle are two crowns extra-- but even at that, the meal is the best buy in Prague -- or anywhere else for that matter!

BONN (WNS) -- Accepting an invitation of the Israeli Government, West German Minister of Justice, Dr. Gustav Heinemann, will visit Israel on Nov. 11 and confer with Israeli leaders on the question of the statute of limitations on the prosecution of Nazi war criminals. Dr. Heinemann had urged abolishment of the statute of limitations which is to go into effect Dec. 31, 1969.

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