



# History and Legends of Jews from Prague and the Czech Lands

Prague



Terezín

Every stone in Old Prague speaks three languages: Czech, German and Hebrew, the languages of the three nations who have lived there together for more than 1,000 years. According to one legend, the first Jews arrived after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. One of the first written mentions of Jews in Prague is a 965 CE report by Jewish merchant and traveler Ibrahim Ibn Ya`qub. Sent by the King of Spain, he was also the first person to describe the city itself, writing in his diary: “Fraga [sic] is the largest city in terms of trade. Coming here ... Slavs, Muslims and Jews.”

During the Middle Ages, Jews in Europe faced the terror of oppression and pogroms. Would you accept the religion of the majority or die in flames? But in the Czech lands, something very interesting happened. In 1254, King Přemysl Ottokar II announced: “Hear everybody! From now on: All Jews are my property.” We might think that no one would want to be the property of the king, like fields or houses. But for Jews, it meant protection. Nobody could harm the property of the king! Little surprise, then, that 16 years later, Jews built the famous Old-New Synagogue in Prague. According to legend, they incorporated stones from Jerusalem into the synagogue’s walls. One great example of the confluence of Czech, German and Jewish cultures is the writer Franz Kafka, who was Jewish, wrote in German and knew Czech. From his friend Jiří Langer—known for his renowned book *Nine Gates*—Kafka learned

about the secret teachings of kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. According to Gershom Scholem, who pioneered the academic study of kabbalah, Kafka found the “secular statement of the Kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit,” especially in his books like *The Castle*. Other prominent Czech Jews include composer Gustav Mahler, writer Max Brod and journalist Egon Erwin Kisch. Other European Jews have Czech connections, too: Sigmund Freud was born in Příbor, and philosopher Edmund Husserl was a native of Prostějov. We do not claim Albert Einstein to be of Czech origin, but he did spend two years in Prague. The relationship between Czechs and Jews has been deep, close and friendly. The two major exceptions are the Prague pogrom of 1389, in which 3,000 Jews died, and the accusations and blood libel made against Leopold Hilsner after the murder of a Christian girl in 1899 in Polná. Thomas

G. Masaryk (who would become the first president of Czechoslovakia) could not accept that his nation would believe in the blood libel, and, acting courageously against public opinion, wrote many letters and articles in order to save Hilsner. After a new democratic state called Czechoslovakia was established in 1918, Jewish life flourished until the 1938 Munich agreement. More than 80,000 innocent Czech Jewish men, women and children were killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. The concentration camp Terezín (Theresienstadt) is a reminder not only of Jewish suffering but also of teachers like Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, who taught the children in the camp to draw and express their emotions through art instead of passively waiting for death. The opera *Brundibár* by Hans Krása, originally performed by children in the camp, is also a powerful testimonial to their experience.

Today, the Czech Republic sits in the center of Europe, with one foot in Western Europe and one in the Slavic East. World travelers have likened Prague to Paris, with its beautiful streets, bridges and castles, cafes and restaurants. Thanks to the new 10 Stars Project you can visit forgotten synagogues not only in Prague, but also in Boskovice, Mikulov and Krnov in the east; in Ústěk, Jičín and Brandýs and Labem in the north; Plzeň and Břežnice in the west; and Nová Cerekev and Polná in the south-central part of the country.

Most of the history and legends of Jews from Czech lands is still undiscovered. Maybe it is waiting for you. So see you “next year in the Czech Republic!”

**Dr. Robert Řehák**  
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## History and Legends of Jews from Prague and the Czech Lands

### Prague guide

#### Prague's Jewish Museum

Founded in 1906, the Jewish Museum in Prague is one of the world's oldest Jewish museums. It was created by Salomon Hugo Lieben, a historian, and August Stein, Prague city councilor and representative of Czech Jewry. It began with a collection of items that had been recovered from synagogues destroyed during the clearance of Prague's Jewish ghetto. When the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939, they abolished the Jewish Museum Association, and the Prague Jewish community took control of the museum's collection, leading to the founding of the Central Jewish Museum in 1942, a project approved by the Nazis. The Central Jewish Museum served as a refuge for liturgical objects, books and documents. After World War II, the museum was nationalized, though Communist rule, imposed from 1948 until the Velvet Revolution in 1989, severely limited its operations. Now an independent entity, the museum encompasses Prague's historic synagogues and other Jewish sites, as well as a number of temporary exhibitions.

#### Old Jewish Cemetery

Prague's centuries-old Jewish cemetery is one of the city's most evocative Jewish sites. One of the world's oldest surviving Jewish burial grounds, the small, grassy cemetery—shaded by towering trees—has some 12,000 tombstones, the earliest of which dates to 1439. Because Jewish burial space was limited, bodies were buried on top of one another, up to 10 graves deep, and tombstones lean against one another. Many of Prague's notable Jewish residents are buried here, including Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, known as the Maharal, most famous for his role in the legend of the Prague golem. In it, Rabbi Loew is said to have created a golem—an anthropomorphic figure made out of clay and

brought to life—in order to protect Prague's Jews from attacks; Rabbi Loew lost control of the golem, who went on a violent rampage. Rabbi Loew managed to destroy the golem and is said to have put its remains in the attic of the Old-New Synagogue, should he ever be needed for protection again.

#### Old-New Synagogue

The Old-New Synagogue, also known as the Altneuschul, is the oldest surviving synagogue in Europe. From the time it was built in the 13th century until the 16th century, when other synagogues were built, it was known as the New or Great Shul; once other synagogues were established, it became known as the "Old-New Shul." Inside, visitors can see the medieval double-nave, the oldest surviving one in a synagogue, making it of tremendous architectural value. An outer room that circles the perimeter of the sanctuary serves as seating for women, who can see the services through small windows. The Old-New Synagogue is at the heart of Prague's Jewish history, and an essential stop for any visitor.

#### The Klausen Synagogue

The Klausen Synagogue is Prague's largest synagogue. Originally, the name "Klausen" referred to three smaller buildings that existed on the site of the current synagogue, which included a yeshiva founded by Rabbi Loew. A devastating fire ravaged the Jewish ghetto in 1689; five years later, the current Klausen Synagogue was built on the site. It is now home to a permanent exhibition covering the basics of Jewish ritual and practice.

#### Spanish Synagogue

The Spanish Synagogue is Prague's newest, built in 1868 as a Reform house of worship. It was built on the site of Prague's oldest synagogue, the Altschul, which by the 19th century was used by Prague's Reform community. Having outgrown its capacity, they



The Klausen Synagogue



Old-New Synagogue



The Pinkas Synagogue

decided to demolish it and build a new synagogue. The Spanish Synagogue's Moorish design was influenced by the Alhambra palace in Spain, giving the synagogue its name. Both its exterior and interior are lavish. Inside are three balconies, an organ and a stained-glass window, all topped by an impressive dome and surrounded by ornately decorated walls. The synagogue houses two permanent exhibitions, one on the history of Jews in Bohemia and Moravia and a second displaying religious silverware from the region, including candlesticks, spice boxes, Kiddush cups and more. Services are held regularly.

#### The Maisel Synagogue

The Maisel Synagogue, founded by Mordecai Maisel, the mayor of Prague's Jewish Town, was originally built in 1592. Maisel received a privilege from Emperor Rudolf II to build a synagogue, resulting in a Renaissance temple with three

naves. The synagogue burned down in the fire of 1689, and was rebuilt several times; the neo-Gothic building that stands today was erected between 1893 and 1905. The Maisel Synagogue is home to a permanent exhibition on the history of Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from the 10th through 18th centuries. In the evening, the synagogue often hosts concerts and other performances.

#### The Pinkas Synagogue

Prague's second-oldest synagogue, built in 1535 in the late Gothic style, is now home to one of the city's most moving memorials to victims of the Holocaust. From 1955 to 1960, Czech artists Vaclav Bostik and Jiri John painted the names of almost 80,000 Jews from the region who were killed during the Holocaust. The exhibit was closed to the public for more than 20 years after the Soviet invasion in 1968, but was





Prague Jewish Cemetery



Old-New Synagogue



Spanish Synagogue



Třebíč Synagogue



Kafka's grave

reopened in 1995. A permanent exhibition in the synagogue features drawings made by children in the Terezín ghetto.

### Chevre Kadisha Ceremonial Hall

This stone building was originally used by the Jewish burial society of Prague—it housed a morgue, a room for ritual purification of the body (a process known as taharah) and a meeting room for the society's members. Built from 1911–1912, the hall was designed in the Romanesque Revival style, giving it the appearance of being much older than it actually is. Visitors can tour a permanent exhibition on Jewish rituals surrounding illness, death and burial.

### Bubny Train Station

During World War II, the Bubny train station served as the main point of departure for

some 50,000 of Prague's Jews being deported to concentration camps and extermination camps. This year, a memorial called "Memorial of Silence" will open at the somber site, the centerpiece of which is "Foundation Railway Track," a 20-meter stretch of train track that reaches up toward the sky; the memorial's designers say that the track is meant to evoke not just the train journeys of Prague's Jews but also the biblical Jacob's ladder, which led to heaven.

### Kafka Museum/Statue

In a small courtyard on a street in Prague's Jewish Quarter there's a statue to Franz Kafka, one of the country's most famous writers. The statue – a large headless man wearing a suit with a smaller figure of Kafka riding on his shoulders – is based on a passage from Kafka's short story "Description of a Struggle." The Franz Kafka Museum features an exhibit on Kafka's relationship with Prague.

### Mucha Museum

Alphonse Mucha, a Czech Art Nouveau artist who lived from 1860 to 1939, was most famous for creating posters for Jewish songstress Sarah Bernhardt; the Mucha Museum highlights his paintings, drawings, photographs and more.

### Jerusalem Synagogue

The Jerusalem Synagogue is a combination of Art Nouveau and Moorish styles. Inside is a permanent exhibition on the Jewish community of Prague from 1945 to today.

## Třebíč

Outside of Israel, the sole Jewish site on the UNESCO World Heritage list is the Jewish Quarter of Třebíč, a Moravian town of 30,000 located 100 miles southeast of Prague and southwest of the provincial capital of Brno. The trio of this former ghetto, the nearby Jewish cemetery and the Basilica of St. Procopius earned their spot on the list for their collective testimonial to centuries-long Jewish and Christian coexistence, dating back to the Middle Ages. Locals still refer to the quarter, located in the center of town between the river Jihlava and the Hrádek hill, as "Jewry row," and it remains the best-preserved Medieval-era Jewish ghetto in Europe, with many of its counterparts destroyed during the two World Wars. Much of the original core architecture of the Renaissance and Baroque homes remains intact, with just five of the original 121 houses no longer standing. Over its 500-year history, the quarter's Jewish population was never persecuted outright nor expelled—until World War II, when most of its remaining 300 or so inhabitants were killed in the Holocaust. The Jewish Quarter reached its peak population in the 19th century with 1,490 residents, about a quarter of the town's population at the time; those numbers dwindled to 1,000 by the end of the 19th century. Two synagogues, a community hall, a Jewish school and a hospital can still be found there, along with a nearby Jewish cemetery – among the Czech Republic's largest, with 11,000 graves and 3,000 tombstones – that was established toward the end of the 15th century. Near the cemetery is a memorial to 20 Jewish soldiers who died in World War I, and a 1957 memorial dedicated to the 290 Jewish victims of the Holocaust from Třebíč.

### Brno

Jewish presence in the Moravian capital of Brno dates back to the 13th century. In 1333, King Ottokar II of Bohemia granted the right for Jews here to self-govern in their community in the city's south, with their own council hall and school. In 1454, Brno's Jews were banished by King Ladislaus V; a Jewish community here did not reemerge until nearly 400 years later, in the middle of the 19th century, when Jews were granted citizenship rights. In 1852, the community established a Jewish cemetery in the Židenice district. By the end of the century, there were nearly 7,000 Jews in Brno, and in 1941, the population had reached 11,102. But between November 1941 through June 1943, more than 10,000 of them were transported to Terezín, departing from an elementary school on Merhautova Street, where a memorial plaque now stands to commemorate the 700 who survived. Of four synagogues in Brno, just one—built in the mid-1930s by Czech architect Otto Eisler—still stands, on Skořepka Street, just south of the center of town. An 1855 Romanesque Revival-style synagogue—the first building in the city with electric lighting—was burnt to the ground by the Nazis; another, built in 1906, was demolished in the 1980s, preserved only in a plaque on a Ponávka Street house. The Jewish community of Brno was reestablished after the war, with the synagogue reopening in September 1945. Many departed again in 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel, but there remains a Jewish community in Brno today, headquartered on Jaroše Street.

### Tugendhat Villa

The Tugendhat Villa is a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site and an icon of modern architectural design. Set into a slope (the better to overlook the Brno cityscape), the villa was commissioned by Jewish couple Greta and Fritz Tugendhat for design by the famous German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Designed with an emphasis on space and light, the villa, which was completed in 1930, has no supporting walls or decorative objects, and a partially translucent onyx wall reflects the light of a setting sun. Afraid for the future, the Tugendhats immigrated in 1938, first to Switzerland and then Venezuela, at which point the villa was taken over by the Gestapo. After being destroyed by Soviet troops, the villa underwent a \$9.2 million restoration, completed in 2012. British author Simon Mawer was inspired by the villa and its patrons to write his best-selling novel and Man Booker Prize contender, *The Glass Room*. The villa has been home to political milestones: In 1992, the treaty that divided the Czech Republic and Slovakia was signed there. Reservations to tour the villa should be made well in advance.

### The Ten Stars

Just 30 minutes from Prague, in a town that had a Jewish community dating back to 1515, is a beautifully restored synagogue that most visitors never see. Approximately one hour away there are six more glorious, restored synagogues and buildings. And within four hours of Prague, there are two more painstakingly renovated synagogues in towns where once Jewish life flourished. These are the Ten Stars.



In 2014, with a large grant from the European Union Fund and Czech Ministry of Culture, the Federation of Jewish Communities completed the restoration, renovation and preservation of synagogues and associated Jewish sites in ten relatively small towns throughout the Czech Republic. In addition, a permanent exhibition was created that focuses on an aspect of Czech Jewish history related to each place.

From the southern town of Mikulov with its vineyards and proximity to Vienna, to the quiet, northwest medieval town of Ústětk, visitors can feel the breath of Jewish life in the cobblestone streets and centuries-old buildings. Only one of the Ten Stars – Plzeň (Pilsen) – has a renewed Jewish community. In the others, there is none. Yet, the cooperation of the local communities and individuals who

worked to help restore the sites and today maintain the buildings and exhibitions played an integral part in the success of the project. “It’s actually one museum scattered around the country,” said Tomas Kraus, the executive director of the federation. “The exhibition in each site will be linked to one certain phenomenon in Jewish history, culture, religion, traditions. The idea is that if you visit one of the sites, even by chance, you will realize that there are nine other parts of the exhibition, so you will want to visit them, too.”

While most Jewish visitors to the Czech Republic only explore the Jewish Quarter of Prague, a day or overnight trip to one or more of the Ten Stars is well worth the journey.

Photographs: Irena Brožová,  
Milan Jaroš, Jaroslav Mareš,  
Ladislav Renner and Libor Sváček





Mikulov Jewish Cemetery



Pilsen Synagogue interior



Třebíč



Třebíč Prokop Basilica

## Start Planning Your Jewish Heritage Trip to the Czech Republic

Magni Help Tour Agency  
e-mail: [magni@helptour.cz](mailto:magni@helptour.cz)  
[www.sacredczech.com](http://www.sacredczech.com)

Federation of Jewish Communities in Czech Republic  
e-mail: [secretariat@fzo.cz](mailto:secretariat@fzo.cz)  
[www.fzo.cz](http://www.fzo.cz)



Mikulov

### Bohemia Sour

40 ml Slivovitz Kosh  
5 year-old  
30 ml lemon juice  
20 ml sugar sirup  
1 bar spoon vanilla sugar  
1 egg white

Shake, pour and decorate with plum and lemon peel

### Where to stay

#### Prague (Praha)

##### Hotel King David (kosher)

[www.hotelkingdavid.cz](http://www.hotelkingdavid.cz)

This 5-star boutique hotel is the only kosher lemehadrin hotel in Prague, serving full Israeli and local style breakfast. A comfortable, 20-minute walk to the Jewish Quarter.

##### Hotel Emblem

[www.emblemprague.com](http://www.emblemprague.com)

Set in Old Town Prague, this lifestyle hotel, with modern, Art-Deco style interiors created by artists from around the world is a gathering place for travelers and a haven for locals.

##### Augustine Hotel

[www.augustinehotel.com](http://www.augustinehotel.com)

Centrally located between Prague Castle and the Charles Bridge, this luxury hotel was created from seven buildings dating back to 1284, many of which have historical significance.

#### Mikulov

##### Hotel Galant

[www.galant.cz](http://www.galant.cz)

Located in the heart of Mikulov within walking distance of the Jewish synagogue and other sites, the Hotel Galant offers lovely views, its own wine, wine tastings, and on-site craft brewery.

### Where to eat and drink

Food and drink throughout the Czech Republic ranges from local pubs with fresh, traditional Czech food to trendy establishments boasting award-winning cocktails (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), dazzling views and superb service. Local beer, wine and slivovitz (kosher and non-kosher) guarantee an authentic experience.

#### Prague

##### Bugsy's Bar

[www.Bugsysbar.cz](http://www.Bugsysbar.cz)

##### Black Angel's Bar

[www.blackangelsbar.cz](http://www.blackangelsbar.cz)

##### Field Restaurant

One Star Michelin Guide 2016  
[www.fieldrestaurant.cz/en](http://www.fieldrestaurant.cz/en)

##### Terasa U Prince

[www.hoteluprince.com](http://www.hoteluprince.com)

##### Kampa Park

[www.kampagroup.com](http://www.kampagroup.com)

#### Mikulov

##### Vinařství Volařík wine and wine tasting

[www.vinarstvivolarik.cz](http://www.vinarstvivolarik.cz)

##### Hotel Galant Restaurant

on site micro-brewery, local Galant wines and fresh, delicious food [www.galant.cz](http://www.galant.cz)

#### Třebíč

##### Kavárna a Vinárna Salsa

– sophisticated, local pub on the water



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