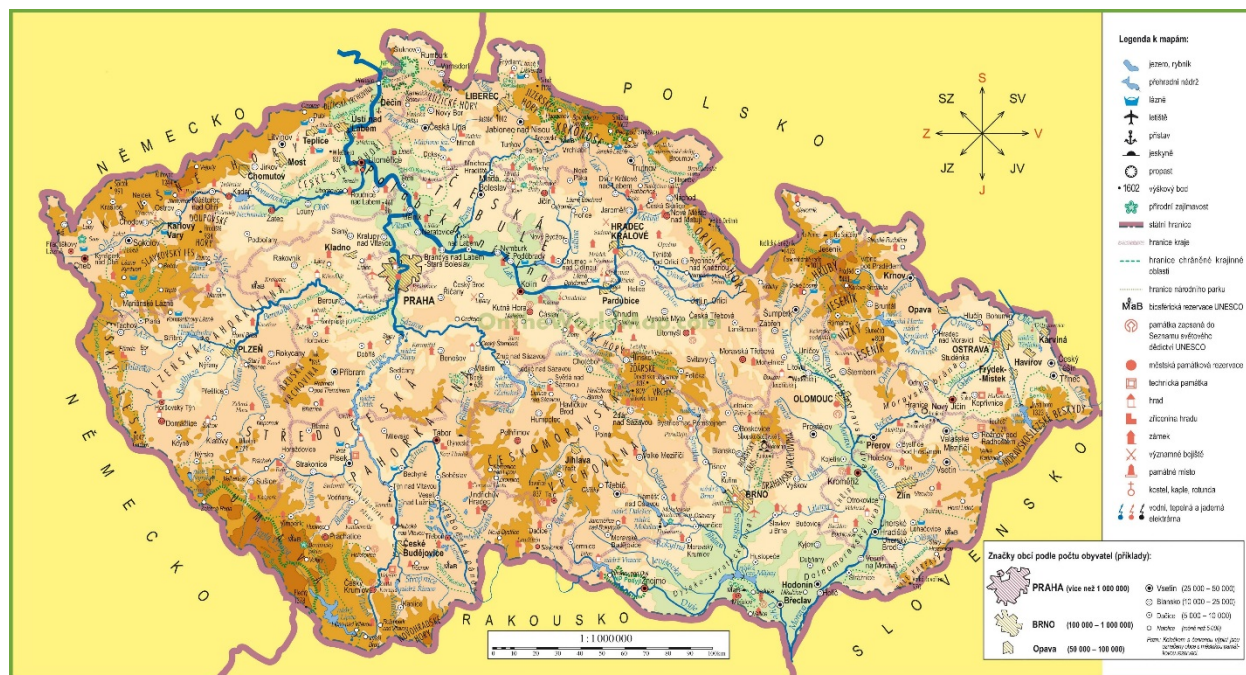


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## A Personal History of Turnov (with photos)



On this map of the Czech Republic, Turnov is southeast of Liberec, the city at the far north. (Prague is due south of Liberec.) Brno, my Czech home, is in the southeast. (Zlin is east of there, toward the border with Slovakia.) Though there's no formal border, Bohemia and Moravia are loosely separated by highlands running southwest to northeast, in mustard brown.

From the time of my arrival in the Czech Republic—in September a decade ago—I was intent on seeking out sites of Jewish life and memory, as many as I could take in during excursions from my home base in Brno, the nation's second-largest city and principal town of Moravia, the easternmost of the country's two major regions. (Bohemia, with Prague, is to the west.) On my first foray in the country, to give a talk at a conference in a town called Zlin, I chatted up a local politician named Ondrej at lunch and inquired as to his sense of how Czech people today think about past Jewish presence in this land. Ondrej allowed as how he himself had a modicum of Jewish ancestry, but I didn't get the sense that Jewish absence registered all that much. This was the region, in the country's far east, where the plum brandy called slivovitz—a national staple, a sort of fruit moonshine—was produced, primarily by Jewish distillers. It seemed to me that the entire country had gone on a slivovitz bender and, waking the next morning, had just a dim recollection of where it had been. I'm being glib—a peril when characterizing what I could learn only at some considerable remove, lacking fluency in the Czech tongue. But still. Within days I'd sought out the main synagogue and cemetery in Brno—a community of prosperity and prestige, judging from its opulent if toppling headstones—and my explorations fanned out from there. I saw much, learned a lot, and have forgotten as much as I learned, no doubt.

I was especially intent on traveling to Turnov, looking into the site from which the Torah scroll entrusted to our congregation had been taken. At the time, as had been the case since our joining TAI nine years earlier, the scroll was still being unrolled and read from at every Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrated. That had included our son's celebration—that's a story in itself—the first time I'd sat on the bimah and only time until Yom Kippur earlier this month. Like all proud dads, I got to lift the Torah and hold it for witness before the congregation. In its centuries of service, I'm not sure it'd been lifted so high before. I don't suppose I'd been either.

It was a staple part of these ceremonies—a ritual, even—to recite the provenance of the Torah scroll: how it had come from a town called Turnov in Czechoslovakia, from a community that had perished in the Holocaust. That the town was called Turnov seemed about as much as anyone had to say about it. I didn't know as how anyone from these parts had ever been to the place or much looked into it. I resolved to do this—for myself, having handled the scroll, and a de facto emissary from this congregation.



Second-class cars of a typical Czech train—a local, not a sleek, modern Intercity train that runs between countries.

I traveled on Friday, November 23, 2009. From Brno to Turnov takes more than four hours by train. There's no very direct route. And northeastern Bohemia is rugged country: steep hills, winding valleys, rock outcroppings through the train window.



This stock photo (cribbed from the internet, not taken from the train) depicts the region to Turnov's south, known as the Bohemian Paradise (Český Raj)—a major tourist area, rife with castles and crags, the nation's first natural preserve.





Turnov's central station, of typical Austrian ornamentation and build—this in a town the size of Danville, KY, more or less.

Yet Turnov is no backwater. Its central train station is typically solid and formidable. It's hardly more than a village, with some seventeen thousand inhabitants, but its thoroughfares are trafficked, its central square prosperous, its buildings, many of them, well maintained and imposing.



Opposite sides of the central square of Turnov, the statehouse on the right. Note parked cars and main drag running through.

Even smaller Czech towns contain imposing buildings—an artifact of them having been outposts of an empire. (Relations of Austria-Hungary's German-speaking Hapsburg rulers with Yiddish-fluent Jewish communities, and of both with Czech nationalists, were of course complex and vexed. One instance is found in a World War I-era quip: that the initials on soldiers' hat—FJI, standing for Franz Josef I—in fact signified *fur judische interessen*, “in Jewish interests.”)

On my arrival at the station, I slogged up the long, sloping, typically grotty main street, passing two hotels gone out of business before checking into an active one across from the town hall. After striding about the vicinity of the square—a not-so-attractive one, since the main street splits it and makes it frantic and loud—I set off on the recommended “nature walk” toward the outskirts of town. I walked past the secondary school that trains gem workers—a massive edifice, since Bohemia is famous for gems, in particular garnets (Prague’s shops are awash in them), and Turnov is where they come from.



The sprawling gem school; a garnet necklace (circa-60s); and the logo of the chain of shops where bona fide Turnov garnets are sold. Note the exceedingly deep shade, almost black, like dried blood.

It was gems, in good measure, that brought Jews to Turnov. They had been there for centuries—since the sixteenth century, at least—and had erected a couple wooden synagogue buildings, destroyed by fire, before the present stone one. Yet involvement with garnets brought new numbers and prosperity, a prosperity reflected not just in the synagogue but in the community’s cemetery, which I’ll come to after my walk.



I crossed into a park, along a route amply marked as Czech trails invariably are. I passed into open woods, over a river rushing by a dam, past a chateau-ed castle bucolically situated on a ridge, then back along the river's flood plain to town.



Signs like the ones at the upper left guide walkers along a system of marked trails forming a web throughout Czech lands. The chateau is a characteristic 18<sup>th</sup> century remodeling of a castle built a few centuries earlier.





The synagogue's entranceway is nearly surreptitious, tucked just beyond the blue and yellow shop sign. The hotel's restaurant is typically Czech: dark wood, plastered walls, thick square chairs, back-in-the-day pics, and hyperactive beer taps.

I took a steep flight of stairs back up to the square, unaware at the time that I'd passed near the synagogue through the city's Jewish quarter, with buildings three hundred-plus years old, once occupied by shoemakers, hatmakers, grain merchants, distillers, gem-cutters of course, and more. (There's a thorough guide to the area now, produced since my visit, linked to the synagogue's website.) It would have been typical, of course, for Jews to be permitted to make homes in the lowlands near their textile factories and shops, while the Christian elite stayed high and dry above. At the hotel I grabbed a tourist map and lit out for the cemetery.

It's a more than usually depressing site, as these sites go. Plotted on the town's outskirts as a long narrow strip tilting into a hill on one side, it must once have been a somber yet tranquil and picturesque spot, and many of its monuments are handsome and imposing, though not ostentatious. Now, though, the cemetery is abutted by highways and split down the middle by a road overpass.



Under this road, where shade stays and grass won't grow, there's a strip where gravestones jut up from bare dirt, the stones on the hillside looking ready to topple. The place is maintained and commemorated, grass mowed and building painted and trim, with informational signage in both Czech and English. But it's unlikely they'll reroute the road for ghosts.



The cemetery is laid out in historical layers, roughly. Older inscriptions, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, are in Hebrew exclusively.



From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century on, German crops up—German words, German-Jewish names. Later there's Czech—those same names but locally inflected. If you're a woman in Czech lands, it doesn't matter what your name is, they're going to add an -ova to it. More recent stones are modernist, with Deco inflections, with the latest dating to the forced cessation of religious observance in 1941.



These interred individuals, I reflected, must have read from the very scroll our congregants hold, that I held up myself. Their eyes ran over it, their hands grasped the hand-shaped pointer. Knucklebones now. Always I try but cannot imagine the bone-packed strata below the stones. My sight stays resolutely superficial. I'm fixed on the contours of the spot. How stupid and sick, I thought, that the Turnov Jews are



gone. If I could feel more strongly, as strongly as it deserved, I'd be ill with frustrated rage. A cemetery with an abrupt end date and a highway overhead. Such outrage. I took a bit of gravel and laid it on a stone marked Jacob—and Sohn. Stones for bones. I swayed a little, as if davening, which I can't even spell. Attempting devotions of a sort. I meant to be moved, so I moved.



The next morning, Shabbat, I went to the synagogue as soon as it opened. From the hotel on the central square, the most direct route is a stairway cobbled in stone blocks. The entrance is inconspicuous: the usual solid streetscape of stucco-clad houses and stray small shops, breeched by a wrought iron gate. A Mogen David tops the gate.





At a reception desk just inside the door, a young woman with blonde hair took my entrance fee: thirty crowns, about a dollar eighty. I asked if I could take photos, despite a sign by the door forbidding this. In good English (not the rule among Czechs), she went into an explanation about why they did not permit this, how they had a postcard they'd give you in lieu of this, a patient and practiced recitation. I said yes, I understand, but then asked if I could explain my situation. I'm from Kentucky, I said, from a town called Lexington. I didn't have to say more. Yes, she said, that's where our scroll is now.



The woman—Terezie Dubinová, the synagogue's administrator—consented to my taking snapshots to show my congregation. She left her desk and took me to the tabernacle, where the Torah scroll had been kept. She pulled back the garnet-colored curtain (a replacement) to show the scroll she had placed there in lieu of the actual Torah.



She lifted its colorful but insubstantial cover to show me blank cloth furled around spindles to approximate a scroll; as she did, the scroll, less substantial than the Torah, began to tip over, and she scrambled to prop it up. This struck me as poignant, mildly pathetic. This imitation Torah with its attractive but makeshift furnishings, she told me, serves as a demonstration to school kids and other groups she guides there, to whom she describes Jewish observance and the synagogue's original features. A fake scroll stands in for the missing original: this information she uses to make a point to visitors who, twenty years precisely since the Velvet Revolution, are nostalgic for the Communist regime. Things were better then, some opine. But look, she observes, at the sorts of things they did. They sold off this scroll, with hundreds like it, for hard currency.

This was in 1964. Fifteen hundred Torah scrolls, property of the state museum, were put on the block. The scrolls had been stockpiled, amazingly, by the Nazis, stored in Prague's synagogues with thousands of other artifacts of religious observance, in anticipation of Hitler's scheme for a museum of a vanished race. Put on sale by the Communists, the scrolls were mainly bought up by a Jewish foundation in London, a philanthropic outfit which sent them on loan to congregations throughout North America and elsewhere—including ours at TAI.

What surprised me is that only the scroll is missing. Its accouterments—shield, pointer, wrappers and all—remain with the synagogue. There's a glass case where ordinarily they are displayed, though at the time they were in Prague in an exhibit of synagogue silver, presumably in the room full of such artifacts I saw on the Maisel Synagogue's second floor. (They're the property of the Jewish Museum there, I understand, which sends them to Turnov on extended loan.) The empty case, the fake scroll in the Ark: this occasioned a feeling of vacancy familiar to me in those alien days, only intensified by knowing how little we know of the scroll's past life, its situation in this place, even as we replenish it through observance.

The Turnov synagogue is a lovely structure, handsomely and faithfully restored. It dates to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and partakes of that time's prevailing style in synagogue architecture: the so-called Moorish style, with sinuous designs painted in a scheme of teal, navy, jade, taupe, coral, crimson and gold.





This place, the Spanish Synagogue and Jerusalem Synagogue in Prague, the synagogue in Kolin: their prevailing colors and forms could all be mixed without muddling. The building is a cube, more or less, with a compact floor space proportioned to a small community and a vaulted ceiling of a height commensurate with the floor.



Chandeliers hang well down from this lavishly painted ceiling. To one side of the cube a wing abuts: a lower-level lobby, where the reception desk sits near a play area for kids, walled off waist high but open to the sanctuary; a balcony above, the women's quarters, accessed by a stairwell outside. A row of benches runs around the sanctuary, the floor space otherwise vacant. Display cases by the tabernacle contain artifacts unearthed during renovation: pottery, coins, a rusty spike. Where the bimah was there's empty space, but mildly contrasting floor tiles, more sand than buff, mark where it stood.



Terezie had left me to speak with other visitors, after inviting me to head outside and upstairs to the women's quarters. There's a low portal (I bowed at the waist to pass) to a small courtyard where a covered stairwell rises, the stairs original stone, footworn. In the courtyard is a more recent feature: a bronze statue of the Golem. When school kids visit, they know little about Judaism and Jews, but for sure they know the Golem. In the courtyard's frozen rendering, the Golem wears an anguished, astonished expression below the Hebrew letters prominent on his brow. His gaunt hands, held before him, he gazes at. From his torso down he disintegrates, melting into separate rivulets that gather in a puddle at the base. Though the popular tale is derived from German Romanticism, this version is sheer Shoah.



It reminded me of the monument to the victims of Communism on Petřín Hill in the Mala Strana in Prague, which features figures similarly cast in stages of disintegration, descending a stairway which from a distance looks normal but proves to be severely canted and high-stepped.





Up the steep-enough stairs to the women's gallery, there's a fine view of the ornate ceiling and the sanctuary below.



And there are displays containing floorplans and photos of the building's recent renovation. Once I'd returned downstairs, Terezie showed me further photos. The wrought iron gateway, the designs on the walls: once lost or effaced, these elements had been recreated from photos. The original ceiling had mostly survived, marred mainly by fluorescent light fixtures bolted to cast light on shelving that reached nearly to the top of the high-ceilinged place. I knew it had been used as a warehouse: I asked Terezie, what did they store? Appliances, she said, after casting for the word in English—kitchen appliances, refrigerators and such. When the town of Turnov moved to acquire the building (preparatory to its restoration with major support from the government of Norway), the appliance store owner exacted a hefty price, she said. Such people we have with us always, she said, or something to this effect.

Terezie herself proved a person of another sort. Like me, she is not Jewish—no one in Turnov is—but she's absorbed herself in Jewishness in ways that have configured her life. In Prague, where she's from, she completed a doctorate in Jewish Studies, focusing on women's issues. She abandoned academic life when, married with young children, she and her husband resolved to leave the big city and move to a small town. Then this position to administer the synagogue was advertised: prodigiously qualified, she

applied and got the job. She threw herself into her work, guiding groups through the premises, hosting children for educational sessions, arranging events and documenting what transpires.



No one in Turnov is Jewish: this small community was deported in 1943, first to Terezin [Theresienstadt], a week later to Auschwitz, where nearly all perished. A few survivors returned but, with few companions and renewed persecution from Communists, found nothing to keep them and so left—to London, to Canada, in cases Terezie knew of. At TAI we are accurate, then, in referring to this community as lost. But there are Jews in Bohemia still. Up the road in Liberec, the provincial capital, there's a practicing congregation numbering seventy people. In September just before my arrival, something transpired with this congregation, something Terezie documented and showed me photos of. They took their own Torah and drove down the road to Turnov. They held services in the Turnov synagogue—the first since 1941. Thirty-five members attended. Terezie had pictures: the prayer shawls, the yarmulkes, the traveling Torah held up for witness as we lift Turnov's scroll in our children's rites of passage.

I corresponded with Terezie for some months after my visit. I had learned from her about congregations in the U.S. and elsewhere which, similarly entrusted with Holocaust scrolls, had traveled with them to their original homes and held services there. I had it in mind that we might do likewise. It looked as if this might happen with us, but for reasons I won't belabor (water over a dam), it did not. It's an enduring regret of mine that our correspondence and relation thus got cut off. She gets the last words here, from messages and images she sent me before designs we were hatching dissolved—ones I recovered just this morning. Their pertinence, I think, will be obvious.

Tue 3/2/2010 5:46 AM

Dear Mr. Roorda,

I hope machines will work better this time.

I send several photos in four mails.

The theme of some Czech people motivation to keep memory and help to protect Jewish heritage in our country is a topic for a lecture...

I just prepare workshop for history teachers in our region and I work in it with terms "collective memory", "collective consciousness", "collective trauma", "psychological heritage of totalitarian regime".

It seems to be so far and long time ago... but it's very present and it influences our everyday life, values and behaviour more than we can imagine. I want my children live in democratic society as both free and responsible people, that's all.

Thanks for your keeping in touch,  
best wishes,  
Terezie Dubinova





For me every connection with Lexington is very exciting. Tell you the truth, I'm sure it is better for the Torah scroll to be used in the living community than to be a dead museum item. And also it's great to see how the Jewish life is flourishing in the USA. Nazism and communism were not succesfull, nobody cannot destroy a Jewish phenomenon, I believe. So when I present our synagogue, I can draw a line: it is not only (tragic) European past, it is a presence too, living religion, living communities, children entering the religious life... Especially concerning children (bar/bat mitzvah in this case) I feel it hopefully. My children (we have two daughters) give me a lot of joy and hope too , with their pure feelings and respect for the Divinity (Mother Earth and Shekhinah, in our case).

[This presentation is drawn largely from an article I wrote for the December 2009 issue of *Shalom*, supplemented by new introductory and concluding material. The passage on the cemetery is transcribed from an entry in my notebook, written in the hotel restaurant the evening of my visit. Except for the map, crags, garnets, and Terezie with kids, the photos are my own.]