

An Homage to the Jews of Eastern Europe

The cities of Eastern Europe, Warsaw, Crakow, Budapest, Vienna and Prague are beautiful; filled with rivers, parks, concert halls, and renovated residential and inner city areas. My husband and I traveled to these cities to help re-envision the Jewish culture that once enveloped these cities. This resulting artbook of our trip, as the Black Fire Midrash* suggests, needs to be read not only by the printed black letters but by what is in the spaces in between. The photomontage artworks need to be envisioned in the same way – what is seen and what isn't seen.

Part I: WARSAW

Our guide in Warsaw was a quiet spoken, knowledgeable young woman. She led us through charming sites, such as, the Lazienki Palace on the lake and the Chopin Memorial on the pond as well as several Holocaust memorials. She shared information; 350,000 Jews lived in pre-war Warsaw and today the Jewish population is approximated less than 2,000 people. On our own we sought out an area where Jews lived, six buildings on Prozna street near Plac Grysowski. Today these edifices are upheld by scaffolding in the hopes that the Lauder Foundation will reconstruct them. Jewish stories await to be told and re-told of life in pre-war Warsaw.

PRESENT monuments stand near Warsaw street car tracks

Commemorative stone of the Bunker Heroes Uprising at Mila 18

The Transport Area Gateway to Treblinka called the Umschlagplatz

Warsaw Ghetto Plaque marking the Ghetto Wall confines

Rappaport's stone homage to Jewish Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

PRESENT Warsaw street car tracks mark the past as well

Warsaw carrying on with their lives

As tragedies behind ghetto walls occurred.



Friday night services at the Nosyk synagogue (1902) were unusually comforting. This synagogue was one that survived the war. Smiles lit up everyone's faces when after services we met 200 young Israelis waving Israeli flags entering the synagogue and eager to celebrate an Oneg Shabbat.

Part II: AUSCHWITZ... Birkenau

Silence was my inner response upon disembarking from our tour bus at Birkenau. I observed several young Israelis in contemplation at the railroad tracks, those tracks that united Birkenau with Auschwitz. I had no words then and few now.

The immenseness and emptiness of Birkenau is overpowering as were the latrine smells of the 60 year old so-called barracks. Only a memorial candle's flame can wipe away the sight of people posing for pictures under the sign Arbeit Macht Frei.** I couldn't have ever prepared myself for the sight of ice cream and gas ovens.



Part III: CRAKOW

The city of Crakow possesses a magnificent Wawel Cathedral (C. 11th century) and a history as a city of monarchs. One-fourth of pre World War II Crakow was Jewish, 60,000 strong; today only 1,000 are reported as Jews. Once a year there is a celebration of Jewish culture in Kazimierz Square which hosts 10,000 people, most of whom are visitors.

From the bus – a Crakow ghetto wall section –remnant
Oscar Shindler's factory and entrance gate WHAT IS
From a walk – Embedded impression in a stone doorway but no mezuzah
Restaurants with Jewish menus but no Jews
Trios playing klezmer music but no Jewish musicians
A longing for what was and a sadness for WHAT IS

The Remuh Synagogue functions today in Kazimierz Square. Here visiting Hassids pay homage to Rabbi Isserles and pray at his grave. The roof of the Progressive Synagogue can be seen from the square and the congregation is 100 strong. Some faint smiles for what is.



Krakow

Part IV: BUDAPEST

The 14th century remains of cemetery headstones and a synagogue attest to the facts that a Jewish community came early to the city of Buda. Budapest combines old Buda and newer Pest and is a beautiful city on the banks of the Danube. Its wide boulevards, grand buildings and spas attest to its grandeur. For over 700 years the large Jewish community thrived in Hungary until the Germans invaded in World War II. From a pre war Jewish population of 200,000 it is remarkable that 60,000 Jews survived and returned to live in Budapest.

The Doheny Synagogue stands as the once proud home to 5,000 Progressive Jews and is now used on special occasions. In the courtyard is a Weeping Willow Memorial Tree, as an upside down menorah, where 65,000 Hungarian names of Holocaust victims are imprinted on silver leaves. The light shines in the courtyard on a stained glass memorial honoring the righteous gentiles who saved Jewish lives. A marker nearby cites the birthplace of Theodore Herzl, father of the state of Israel.

In 2004 the Jewish community opened a very impressive Holocaust Memorial Museum. I overheard a visitor comment that “the figures of deaths were exaggerated.” Those comments, in that place, in this time – TODAY - left me shaken. We visited Raoul Wallenberg Park and Memorial where we came upon a woman who offered her family’s story of survival as testimony to Wallenberg’s heroic work.



Doheny Synagogue

The Jewish community of Budapest today JUST BEING
Wander into a kosher bakery,
Drink coffee in one of several kosher cafes,
Buy a prayer book in a Jewish bookstore,
Lounge in a kosher hotel,
Stroll among neighborhood synagogues,
Attend religious services
Several thousand strong! JUST BEING

Part V: IN VIENNA



The extraordinary history of the Hapsburgs of Vienna and the stately designed buildings of the Belvedere Palace, reaffirms the beauty I had read about that is Austria. My husband and I strolled to the Café Central, through the parks, past Vienna University to the building where Berta Zuckerhandl held her “salons” in the early 20th century.

We got lost attempting to attend Friday night services at the Stadtempel Synagogue. When we saw an observant Jew we proceeded to ask for directions – he did not see us, did not hear us. A few blocks later we found the Jewish section and synagogue where Austrian police were standing guard. Israeli security asked for our passports and questioned us as to, “why we were coming to the synagogue”, it was unsettling! In spite of the difficulties to enter the synagogue, the services we attended were inspiring. Singing with the congregation reminded me of Jewish oneness – of our past and of our present. Listening to the tenor choir was a pleasure I hadn’t anticipated.

The next day with Jewish travel books in our hands and Jewish history in our minds we wandered from Judenplatz Square, to the Holocaust Memorial designed by Rachel Whitehead, to a branch of the main Jewish Museum (exhibiting shards from a 14th c. mikveh and synagogue), to the cafes where Jewish intellectuals gathered, to the main Jüdisches Museum. The main Jewish museum exhibited three dimensional holograms depicting Jewish past life in Vienna as well as the fantastique artworks of the artists Erik Brauer and Frederich Hunterwasser.



“Re-envision the Jewish past”, THOUGHTS THAT GUIDED US!

IN THE PAST – 200,000 strong, ¼ population of pre war Vienna

Freud, Kafka, Schnitzler,

Pappenheim, Alma Rose

Hakoah sports teams, artist,

professors

“There is nothing Jewish of interest to see in Vienna” OUR GUIDE STATED!!

IN THE PRESENT – Vienna empty of acknowledgement of Jewish life

Empty of cultural contributions of

Jewish achievements

Part VI: TELC & PRAGUE

TELC is an impressive Czech Republic town whose architecture attests to the spread of the Renaissance in the 14th century. The old town square had been renovated and workers were refinishing the old synagogue. At the town’s information area I discovered that pre-World War II Telc had a large Jewish population as many other towns of the Czech countryside had. Presently the Telc community was paying homage to its natives Frantisek Moric Nagl (artist), wife (violinist), two children and their entire extended families who were murdered at Auschwitz. In 1950 – 250 of Nagl’s paintings were discovered hidden in the walls of Terezin. The Phoenix Project of Telc was created to spread tolerance, and future meetings will take place at the rebuilt estate of F.M. Nagl.

PRAGUE is remarkable not only for its Astronomical Clock, Charles Bridge, 1,000 spires, homes of Franz Kafka (Jewish writer), the latest modern building designed by Frank Gehry (Jewish architect) but also for its famous Jewish quarter of Josefov. The rebuilt nature of the Jewish quarter, its many synagogues and near-by souks help promote the feeling of an exciting but strange Disneyland. A mass of people from many countries were also visiting the Alte-Neu Shul, the old Jewish cemetery, the Pinkas Memorial Synagogue (Interior walls list names of 80,000 Jewish victims from Bohemia & Moravia of the Holocaust) as well as Kafka's homes and the Charles Bridge.

LOOKING FOR THE GOLEM of the 17th century

I look toward the Alte-Neu Shul's attic

The protective creature, invented by Rabbi Lowe

Save the Jewish community from its enemies – Of the Past and the Present

O Golem you need to BE!

The dichotomy of the excitement of the city of Prague and its subsuming of Jewish culture was hard to integrate. Our last night we attended a Jewish classical concert in the Sephardic Synagogue. This was the ebb and flow of our trip - excitement, enthusiasm, mixed with tragically sad memories. This Black-White & Photomontage Journal* was created to pay homage to the vibrancy of past Jewish lives and culture in the cities of Eastern Europe.

