

Society for the History of Czechoslovak Jews
66th Annual Memorial Service
March 11, 2012 - Adar 17, 5772
Yizkor Meditation
Presented by Rabbi Norman Patz, President Emeritus

We gather to mourn the murder of Czechoslovak Jews in the Nazi genocide that has come to be called the Holocaust in English, and in Hebrew, the Shoah. The specific tragedy that our service memorializes is the murder of 3,869 Jews who had been held for nearly seven months in the so-called “family camp” at Birkenau, the main killing grounds of the Auschwitz concentration camp. On the eve of Purim in 1944, all 3,869 were sent to the gas chambers. Their murder is a horrifying example of the criminal lunacy of Hitler and his followers who murdered six million of our brothers and sisters. We dare not forget!

Our service has always had two components, Jewish and Czech. In this light, our memorial this year would be incomplete without a tribute to Václav Havel, who died on December 18th at the age of 75. He was the first post-Communist president of Czechoslovakia and a great hero of our time. Havel was a dissident playwright. He first gained broad attention by coauthoring Charter 77, a human rights manifesto demanding cultural and intellectual freedom in Czechoslovakia. The charter became a rallying cry for opposition to the Communist regime, culminating in 1989 in what Rita Klimová labeled the Velvet Revolution. Many of the nearly half a million protesters who crowded into Václav náměstí carried posters with the slogan “Havel Na Hrad” – Havel to the castle! By the end of December, as Communist regimes were crumbling all over Eastern Europe, Václav Havel was elected president of Czechoslovakia. And after Slovakia became independent in 1993, he remained as president of the Czech Republic.

Václav Havel was a true and steadfast friend of the Jewish people. He repeatedly denounced anti-Semitism. In 1991, speaking of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, he expressed what he described as his “metaphysical feeling of shame of the human race, of mankind, of man. I feel,” he said, “that this is man’s crime and his disgrace.”

At a time when many European leaders were condemning Israel for everything they could find a way to condemn the country for, Havel defended Israel as a strong democracy. He was one of the founders of Friends of Israel, made up of prominent international political figures. One of his first foreign trips as President was a three-day visit to Israel in April of 1990.

Havel’s support of Israel and his friendship to Jews was part of a significantly greater legacy – his universal message of freedom. In both respects, Václav Havel was a true disciple of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. Natan Sharansky, who struggled heroically against Communist oppression in the Soviet Union as Havel was fighting in Czechoslovakia, said this: “Václav Havel was one of the few islands of intellectual freedom in the sea of totalitarian rule.” When Havel died, there was an outpouring of tributes to this hero of our time. You have in hand a copy of the letter that Eva Derman and I sent on behalf of the

Society to be included in the Book of Tributes at the Czech Embassy in Washington. A similar letter was sent to the Consul General here in New York. The sense of loss was still very much evident when my wife Naomi and I were in Prague three weeks ago. And today, at this memorial service, we pay our humble respects. We pray that his memory will be a force for good.

Václav Havel brought 180 Jewish leaders from across Czechoslovakia with him on that trip to Israel. One of them was Fero Alexander, the secretary general of the Slovak Jewish community. Naomi had met Fero in Paris during the Communist era (he was occasionally able to travel abroad because he was a member of an approved Slovak music troupe) at a meeting of the European Jewish Forum, I got to know him a few years later in Israel and we stayed with him and his family on our first trip to Bratislava (and have spent time with him there many times since). During that first visit, he took us to meet his mother, Iby Alexandrova. Iby, who is now 98 years old, is a survivor of both the concentration camp in Sered and Terezín. She told us this story about her life: “I was born,” she said, “in Pressburg. I went to school in Pozsony and now I live in Bratislava, but I have never moved from my apartment!”

The historian Pavel Dvořák describes pre-World War I Bratislava in a similar way. “When people did their shopping in the morning, the city was called Prešporok, since Slovak was the language spoken at the markets. At lunchtime and in the afternoon, it became Pozsony, since that was when the Hungarian-speaking civil servants returned home to eat. In the evening, the theatre and opera were abuzz with Germans, and the city became Pressburg.”

Our people were an integral and vital part of that mix of ethnic groups in both Slovakia and the Czech Lands. Now they are gone, and the newly gentrified, glossy appearance of Czech and Slovak cities conceals the ghosts, alleviated only a bit by the few sparks of renewed Jewish life in both countries. Tourist crowds fill the Jewish quarter in Prague and walk the streets of the beautifully restored town center in Bratislava. Some visit Boskovice and Mikulov, and the old synagogue and Jewish streets of Třebíč that have been turned into museum exhibits. Even Terezín gets many visitors. I wonder: Do they comprehend the tragedy that lies just beneath these brightly painted surfaces? Can they grasp the loss to our people and the betrayal of humanity? Can we?

Milan Kundera has famously dubbed Prague a city of forgetting whose past has been constantly erased in the interests of successive political regimes. Towns which formerly had German names adopted new Czech names after the war. When the Soviets departed, the metro stop Leninova became Dejvická. Prague, the Czech Lands and Slovakia are obsessed with history, with remembering and with forgetting in a dialectic between the two. (Adapted from pages 5-6 of *Prague Palimpsest* by Alfred Thomas, 2010)

Perhaps future moral heroes will follow the example of Václav Havel and have the courage to use these partly hidden memories to shape a better, more humane future for the sake of the victims, the loved ones we mourn and for the sake of generations yet to come. For this we pray.