

Hermanuv Mestec and the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation

Ted Smith, December 2017

In 1993, Ted Smith and Rabbi Rosalind Gold visited Hermanuv Mestec. Ted visited again in 2000. This document chronicles his research and the oral history shared with him during his visits. The Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation (NVHC) is publishing this travelogue to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the deportation of the Jewish Community of Hermanuv Mestec by the Germans in December 1942.

The Jewish Community of Hermanuv Mestec

Today, Hermanuv Mestec is a small town with approximately 4,800 residents in the Pardubice Region of the Czech Republic about 54 miles east of Prague. It is in the northern foothills of the Iron Mountains. Individual Jews first appear in the Hermanuv Mestec records in the 15th century. The town was the property of a series of aristocratic landowners. To develop the town economically, as well as boost the family's income in the late 16th century, the landowner invited Jewish craftsmen, traders, and moneylenders to settle in the town. A compact settlement grew up on Jews' Street (now Havlickova Street), the road from the town center to the Jewish cemetery. The Jewish Settlement had its own mayor, police, and other officials.



**Rabbi Gold during 1993 visit
to Hermanuv Mestec**
(Photo by T Smith)

The landowner sponsored the construction of a synagogue on this street, replacing a smaller synagogue that burned down in a town fire in 1623. A rabbi was appointed to serve the needs of the community and the surrounding countryside. Hermanuv Mestec was also the seat of the region's *mohel* (a person who performs circumcisions) and *shochet* (kosher slaughterer).

In 1726, the ruling Habsburgs' introduction of restrictions on Jewish movement, residence, marriage, and family size led to the synagogue being torn down (it was too close to the town's Catholic church), the abolition of Jewish self-government, and the enclosure of the settlement with gates, and the requirement that Jews return home by nightfall and stay at home on holidays. The current landowner did what he could to soften these restrictions, including sponsoring the construction of a new synagogue in the Baroque style in 1760 closer to the community and cemetery.

This synagogue was outgrown as the Jewish community reached its peak in the 19th century, and a new (some say remodeled) synagogue in stripped-down Neo-Romanesque style was built in

1870, again with the backing of the landowner. In 1848 the Habsburg Empire's restrictions on Jews were lifted, and a steady outflow of Jews ensued to Prague, other large cities in the empire, and abroad. In 1890 the Habsburg government decreed the merger of the dying Jewish communities in the region surrounding Hermanuv Mestec, and this was confirmed after the Czechoslovak state was formed, when the net was enlarged to include more dying or defunct communities in the region. The Hermanuv Mestec Jewish community, by virtue of its long established protected status in the law and with a rabbi in residence, came to serve about 500 Jews in the region even though the Hermanuv Mestec community itself had only about 60 Jews (15 families) on the eve of the German takeover.



The synagogue in Hermanuv Mestec today
(Photo by G Freihalter, Creative Commons)

The status of Hermanuv Mestec as a regional Jewish center accounts for the large number of Torah scrolls attributed to it. The Memorial Scrolls Trust lists more than a dozen of the 1564 Torah scrolls in its inventory as coming from Hermanuv Mestec. This does not include Torah scrolls that were retained by the Czechoslovak Government as having artistic or historic merit. Some of the scrolls in the Memorial Scrolls Trust collection were small family Torah scrolls such as the one on display at Temple Concord in Binghamton, NY, while larger ones were deposited in the Hermanuv Mestec synagogue for safekeeping as communities in the region died out. Despite the best efforts of NVHC researchers, we cannot establish a pre-1942 history of our Torah, though it is old (most parts dating back 250-300 years, with some parts older).

In 1940 the Germans closed the synagogue and banned organized Jewish life. Important community activities such as the *Chevra Kadisha* (burial society), *Bikur Holim* (society for visiting sick) and women's group were forbidden. In 1942, the community's Torah scrolls and other religious appurtenances were sent to the Jewish Museum in Prague, which served as the Germans' central collecting point.



The Chevra Kadisha building (morgue) in Hermanuv Mestec

(Photo by R Gold)

During the German occupation, a few of the local Jews managed to emigrate. A few more were arrested or shot by the Germans, including Emil Papil, Hermina Maresova's son-in-law. Most of the remaining Jews of the 60 were assembled in Pardubice and on December 5, 1942 put on a train to Terezin (or Theresienstadt), a concentration camp north of Prague in German-occupied Czech lands.



**Rabbi Isak Folkmann,
He and his wife Arnostka died at
the Terezin Concentration Camp**

Among them were Hermina Maresova (age 50, who survived the war), her widowed daughter from her first marriage Anna Papilova (age 27), and her granddaughter Jitka Papilova (age 3). Hermina Maresova is memorialized on the NVHC Yahrzeit board. Many, including Rabbi Isak Folkmann and his wife Arnostka, died at Terezin. The rest were sent in stages to Auschwitz. Hermina Maresova was shipped out in 1943, and Anna and Jitka were shipped out the following year and killed shortly thereafter.

Among those not deported were Hermina Maresova's three children from her second marriage to a non-Jew. As children of a mixed marriage, they were not registered members of the Jewish community. One of these three children was Ladislav Mares, who became NVHC's good friend after we first met him in 1993 until his death in 2007. Ladislav Mares is also memorialized on NVHC's Yahrzeit board.

During the war Ladislav and his siblings lived quietly in Hermanuv Mestec. The town chose not to make an issue of their continued presence. As the war drew down, Hermina Maresova was shipped to Bergen-Belsen. At the end of the war, Ladislav and his older brother received a postcard informing them that their mother was alive. They borrowed a car and drove to Bergen-Belsen to bring their mother and one or two other survivors home.

Once the Jews were gone, the despoiled synagogue, stripped of its Judaica--though not its ark—was turned into a German Army warehouse. The rabbi's house, which served as the prayer meeting area except during the high holidays (on the eve of the war the community barely exceeded a minyan), became public housing. The cemetery, after more than 500 years one of the largest in Bohemia with



The Jewish Cemetery
(Photo by Petr, Creative Commons)

more than 1,000 graves, was a matter of local pride. A local stone mason who had carved many of the recent gravestones, planted a row of evergreens along the outside wall in 1941 to screen it from the road and make it less obvious to the Germans. During the rest of the war the cemetery became overgrown with woody plants, and gravestones fell or were tipped over.

At the end of the war the Jewish community properties in Hermanuv Mestec were deeded to the Jewish community in Prague. The Prague community had neither the manpower nor the funds to look after them, and in 1947 it sold the synagogue and rabbi's house to the Czech Brethren, a Protestant sect. The takeover of the government by Communists in 1948 scotched Brethren plans to convert the synagogue into a church, and the Brethren used the rabbi's house for religious services until they could find better quarters. Once the Brethren moved out, the synagogue and rabbi's house were deeded to the town authorities. The synagogue became a storehouse for large wooden spools for a cable factory. The town eyed the cemetery as the site for a municipal garage, but local unhappiness put those plans on ice. In 1980-82 the town authorities did manage over public protest to tear down most of the Jews' houses along Havlickova Street as part of a program of urban renewal.

After the Communist regime fell in 1989, Ladislav Mares founded the Society of Friends of Jewish Culture in Hermanuv Mestec. This group took as its first task the restoration of the cemetery. Wild vegetation was cleared, gravestones set back up and inventoried, the surrounding walls repaired, and the Chevra Kadisha and caretaker's houses restored.

Although the Prague Jewish community provided some expertise in deciphering the gravestones, all the physical labor was done by local Christians, including scouts. Ladislav then took it on himself to get support for restoring the synagogue and rabbi's house. It was at this point when we met him in 1993. He was making the rounds of the town hall, the regional government, the Prague Jewish community, and anyone else he could think of in search of funds. To help in his efforts, NVHC launched a fund raising campaign during the High Holidays in 1993. NVHC was the only foreign source of funding for the restoration, and in gratitude Ladislav gave NVHC fragments of the synagogue's 19th century stained glass.

While visiting in 2000, Ted accompanied Ladislav on his visits to local and regional authorities to gain more funding and to nail down the preparations for the synagogue's reopening. The restored synagogue was opened as a concert hall in 2001. Ladislav was tireless. He succeeded in having the exterior fully restored to its original form, including the installation of the Ten Commandments on the roof apex to replace those torn down by the Germans in 1940. He was particularly proud of the interior of the synagogue, which is an explosion of light and color, reflecting the 19th century taste for colorful decoration. The only modification, aside from new plumbing and electric wiring, was the extension of the *bimah* (raised platform where Torah scrolls are read) to make a proper stage for concerts, lectures, and dramatic performances. The rabbi's house was also restored as an art gallery and houses a collection of works by East Bohemian artists as well as a small exhibition on the Jewish community, the synagogue, and its restoration.



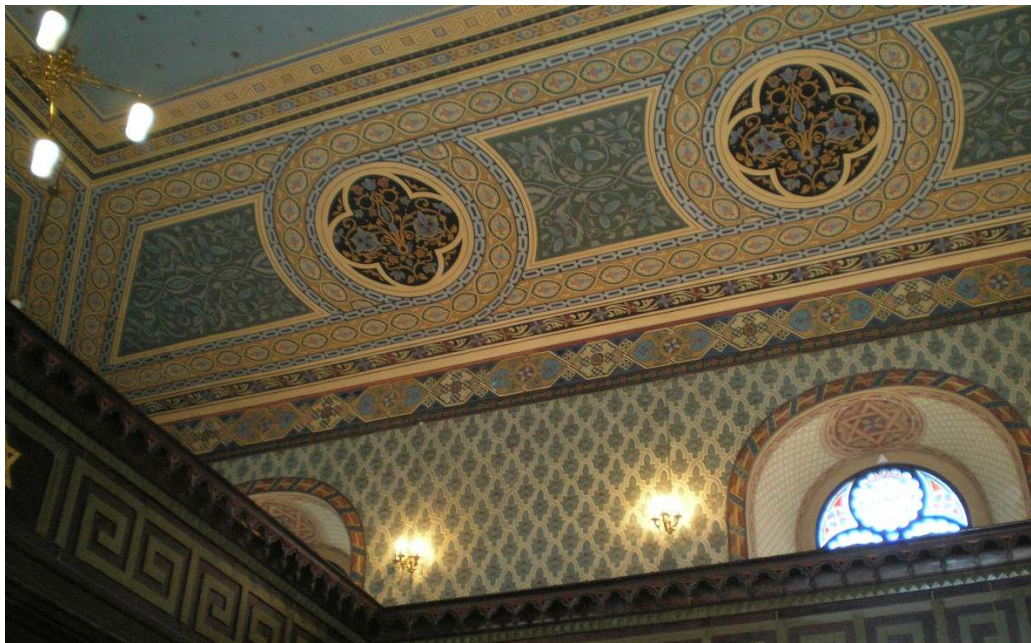
Fragments of stained glass from the Hermanuv Mestec synagogue, now hanging in NVHC lobby
(Photo by A Lacher)



Ten Commandments
(Photo by G Freihalter, Creative Commons)



Plaque listing NVHC donors towards the restoration of the Hermanuv Mestec synagogue
(Photo by A Lacher)



Ceiling detail of the restored synagogue
(Photo by J Hron, Creative Commons)