

Preface

For several decades now I have been pursuing extensive research on Nazi policy in East-Central Europe, perusing the mammoth accumulation of records, documentation, and literature: the degradation of humanity and the machinery of genocide. I came to realize that Germany's system of ruling in conquered Europe varied from country to country, as did the persecution of Jews. This meant ultimately that the toll of Jewish lives was by and large determined by the nature and extent of German control, by the Führer's postwar global aims, and in a certain measure by the attitude of the local population.

I sensed a definite need to approach this subject with a panoramic view and in a broader context, delving into earlier history such as the Czech-German conflict.

Two issues that seem diametrically opposed are examined in detail: the traditional sources of empathy and solidarity of the host nation with the Jewish community, and Czech anti-Semitism in the recent past. Ivan Klíma, the noted Czech-Jewish writer, has commented on the latter issue: "If we speak of the magnificent surge of Jewish culture that Prague witnessed more than anywhere else, we must recognize also that there has never been a long period here without some sort of anti-Semitism." I presumed that this two-pronged enquiry might serve my exploration, broadening intellectual horizons and providing new insights for the scope of this study.

One of the cardinal questions requiring elucidation is why even in this enclave, known as the most democratic country "east of the Rhine" and perceived as markedly philo-Semitic, the losses suffered by the Jewish population were numerically so high. Josef Korbél in his standard *Twentieth-Century Czechoslovakia* made this significant point concerning the victims of the "Final Solution" in the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia: "The grim reality remains that in the Czech lands, in the former Republic of T. G. Masaryk who had fought anti-Semitism throughout his long life, the results were the same as all over Hitler's Europe."

Korbél's statement encapsulates several interconnected questions historians have thus far avoided formulating. I shall venture to ask the following: Was the interwar republic's approach toward the Jewish entity outright positive? To what degree did Nazi ideology influence Czechs? Did the long tradition of Jewish presence in this enclave and the Jews' unique role in economy and

culture affect Czech society's attitudes during the Nazi occupation? Did the notions of hatred toward the common enemy and of parallel destinies link Czechs and Jews? I presume that despite all the methodological problems involved and the lack of standardized contemporary surveys or polls, certain conclusions may still be drawn.

During the four decades of the Communist regime's isolationism and provincialism, Czech historiography of the twentieth century in general and the sphere of Jewish studies in particular suffered a long hiatus. Summarizing matters in "Czech Historiography at a Turning Point" in 1992, Jan Křen pointed out: "A typical example of 'this nationalism of ignorance' was the history of the Jews, without whom many periods in the history of the Czech lands can hardly be imagined. In historiography too . . . virtually nothing was done in this sphere of historical studies over the past two decades."

One of the problems I encountered was the choice of material and references in light of the enormous amount of documentation made accessible in Czechoslovakia after 1989, following the collapse of Communism. I would like to think that the new documentary sources and the various seminal conferences I attended in the years 1990–2001 in Prague, Ostrava, and Terezín have opened up new vistas, augmenting the scope of my research.

The study relies heavily on World War II primary documentary sources held in Czech archives, on government publications, and on holdings in German, British, American, Swiss, and Israeli archives. In addition, I have employed reminiscences and diaries, survivors' testimonies, and private correspondence smuggled out to the free world during the war.

The core of the book, namely the chapters dealing with the period of the Holocaust and its antecedents, is based largely on a variety of archival sources and memoir literature. In the prologue, the historical setting, and the epilogue I have to a greater extent had recourse to secondary literature—the findings of other historians—presenting these with my own emphases and interpretations.

The prologue presents a survey of the centuries-old spiritual ties between Czechs and Jews, the main features of which were a common bond to the Old Testament and future-oriented beliefs in the restoration of statehood. This unique affinity culminated in modern times in Masaryk's role as an "apostle of truth" during the Hilsner affair; his impact on Prague's leading Zionists; the struggle for Czechoslovakia's independence; and the recognition of the Jews as a national minority.

An overview of the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia is given in chapter 1. It shows development from an autonomous, strictly isolated, and close-knit religious community into a pluralistic, liberal-minded society. The

process of Jewish assimilation, both German and subsequently Czech, yielded to the transformation of Jewry at the *fin de siècle* and the rise of the Czech-Jewish movement and of Jewish nationalism (Zionism).

In chapter 2 the part played by the Jewish minority in the Parliament of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918–38) is viewed against the background of the multinational structure of the overall population, the vital role of the Jews in the economy, and their participation in all spheres of public and cultural life. With Hitler's ascent to power in Germany in 1933 came the massive impact of Nazi propaganda upon rightist groups, the escalation of anti-Semitism, and Sudeten German irredentism and its effects.

The 1938 September crisis is the focus of chapter 3. The refugee problem and the faltering of a stratum of Czech writers, journalists, and professionals meant a dilemma for the Jewish community leadership. "Aryanization" of the Czech Writer's Club, the tragic consequences of the Munich *Diktat*, and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia would follow.

Chapter 4 surveys the isolation of the Jewish entity in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; the "Nisko campaign"; and the actions of the Council of Jewish Religious Communities (JRC) during the so-called pacification period in 1939–41. Along with the reeducation, professional training, and emigration campaign came confiscation of Jewish property, Aryanization, forced labor, and the onerous and humiliating tasks imposed by the Nazi authorities upon the "Council of Jewish Elders" in the deportation campaign (1941–43).

The retardation policy of the Czech Protectorate government under General Alois Eliáš is described in chapter 5, as are the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws by *Reichsprotektor* Constantin von Neurath and the issue of the "privileged Jews." With the arrival of Reinhard Heydrich as the new acting *Reichsprotektor* (September 27, 1941) came the arrest of Premier Eliáš, the state of civil emergency, wiping out of the resistance cells, and wholesale deportation of Jews. Completing the picture are Heydrich's assassination (May 27, 1942), the Jewish culprits of the *heydrichiáda*, the servility of the second Czech collaborationist government, and the nazification and reeducation of Czech youth.

Chapter 6 views matters farther afield—the policy of the London-based Government-in-Exile; recruitment of Jewish volunteers in Palestine in the fall of 1939; and Jewish participation in the Czechoslovak units abroad. The discussion covers attitudes and responses to the plight of the Czech population in general and that of the Jews in particular as well as President Beneš's policy and his ties with the Home Resistance (1939–45).

The resistance groups engaged on the home front are profiled in chapter 7. Jewish individuals and groups participated in various acts of defiance and

resistance—intelligence, sabotage, and a clandestine press. Also delineated are the strategy of the Moscow-based Czechoslovak leadership and their influence upon the Communist resistance cells and the shaping of government policy in the postwar years.

Chapter 8 deals with the reaction of the local population to the persecution of the Jews. Among the responses were Czech writers' assistance to their Jewish friends and solidarity and compassion from gentile individuals and groups reaching out to Jews by arranging their safe passage abroad or providing them with shelter or false papers. Individuals caught by the Nazis for sheltering Jews faced a cruel fate.

The dual tasks of Ghetto Terezín are unraveled in chapter 9: decimation was the crux, but it was also designed for propaganda and alibi—to camouflage the Nazi annihilation policy. Central to its effect were the stance of the Jewish “Self-Government,” the wartime collaboration of the International Committee of the Red Cross with Nazi authorities, and the “inspection visits” of the ICRC delegation in Terezín in 1944–45.

The unique manifestation of defiance and courage by inmates of the ghetto of Terezín, especially the cultural elite of writers, poets, musicians, artists, and educators, are explored in chapter 10. Care was devoted to cultural activities and the education of children and youth. Artists and musicians on the threshold of death exercised their creativity in songs, music, satirical opera, and an “open university” in the struggle to boost morale and preserve the sanity and lives of the doomed population.

The epilogue surveys the postwar years. Renewal of community began for the “saved remnant” but was affected by mass emigration to Israel and the decline of communal life under the Communist regime. The manifestations of Prague Spring, the “Normalization” period, and the 1989 November Revolution and its aftermath bring the story to the present.