

THE JEWISH CEMETERY IN HOLEŠOV

The beginnings of the cemetery are connected to the formation of the Jewish community in the town. It means that the cemetery was established in the second half of 15th century. The oldest existing gravestone comes from 1647. The first written reference about the cemetery is from 1651 but it is supposed that this cemetery was established on the former burial ground. It is situated north-west from the centre of the original ghetto, about 100m from the Šach Synagogue. It has an irregular shape which reflects its growth and gives evidence to the flooding of some parts of the locality in spring 1686.

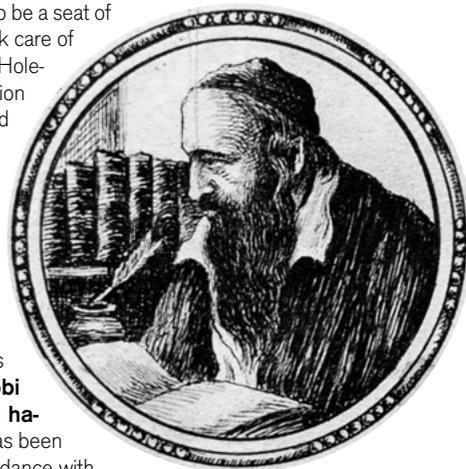
The cemetery comprises of 1500 gravestones spreading on the area. The oldest part from 17th century to 19th century faces the west between the hall and the Rabbi Sabbataj ben Meir ha-Kohen's (Šach) grave. The gravestones are scattered in rather lax rows with their inscriptions facing the east or west. **The Rabbi's area can be seen nearby the Rabbi Šach's tomb.** The rather chaotic organization of the tombstones is typical for the Jewish burial grounds. Most of the oldest tombstones are very simple, some of them are more interesting with Post-Baroque shapes from the 1st quarter of the 19th century. They have richly chiselled contours with relief embellishment, scrolls, and floral motives. The cemetery can be seen as unique as the two panels on each grave are leaning against each other, sometimes even with the front panel of the tomb.

The cemetery is visited for the graves of the prominent personalities such as Rabbi J. B. Feilbogen, J. Freimann, the scholar M. Winder and the second to none, the Rabbi Sabbataj ben Meir ha-Kohen (Šach) (1621 – 63), the scholar, theologian, and a writer. Šach's tombstone resembles a baroque tomb consisting of four lateral panels with the inscription of religious texts, the epitaph and the symbol of the Jewish priests (kohens). The tomb has been restored a few times, in 2005 the last time. The Jewish community built **the ceremonial room of chevra kadisha**, (holy society) at the entrance to the cemetery in 1903. The building conforms to the eclectic style with the floral motives on the indoor decorations. There are also three wooden panels containing the prayers and a stone panel with 253 names of the people tortured to death during the Holocaust. Moreover, there are the panels with the names of the soldiers who died during World War I. Regarding the architecture, the visitors can also see a foundation stone from the New Synagogue or its turret. The ceremonial room was reconstructed between 2002 and 2004.



PERSONALITIES AND THE PRESENT

Holešov was known to be a seat of the Rabbis who took care of their fellows not only in Holešov but in the larger region of Walachia (Vizovice and Vsetín). Later, the Rabbi's seat encompassed the district of Holešov, which was politically defined. Many important personalities of various professions used to work in Holešov. The most famous one is the name of **Rabbi Sabbataj ben Meir ha-Kohen**, whose name has been



known as Šach in accordance with the name of the Hebrew abbreviation of his most important work. He came from Vilna (Vilnius) in Lithuania. He fled after the so called Khmelnytsky Uprising in 1655 when the Jewish population was devastated by the Cossacks during the ensuing massacres within the area of contemporary Lithuania, Ukraine and Poland. Many refugees were fleeing towards to south. Šach got to Strážnice in the Moravia region where he became a Rabbi. At that time, the Jewish community in Holešov asked this distinctive scholar to become a Rabbi there. The Chief Rabbi Abraham Krochmal accepted this request. Hence, Šach held the post from 1657 until his death 8th February 1663. His work included renowned commentaries and works, one of which is Siftej Kohen. He has been recognized world-wide as a predecessor of Chassid's scholarship in a part of Eastern Europe.

Holešov was a birthplace of other Rabbis, for example Isaac Jehuda Löba Zane (1668 – 78 residing in Holešov), Menachem Mendeho from Poznan, (1679 – 85), Josef Oppenheim (1710 – 14). Markus Pollak (1867 – 93) had the New Synagogue built. Jakob Freimann (1893 – 1916) was later employed in Poznan and Berlin. Among other natives of Holešov, we can name Rabbi Alfred Freimann, the Viennese politician Albert Löwe and, also a prominent journalist and writer Ludwig Winder (1889 – 1946). His father used to be a teacher in a Jewish school in Holešov.

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Holešov used to have a prominent Jewish community in Morava. **The oldest written record comes from 1391.** The origins of the Jewish settlement in Holešov are related to the Jews' expulsion from so-called Royal Towns in Morava, e.g. Olomouc or Uničov. They were expelled by King Ladislav Pohrobek and came in 1454 to settle on the north-west periphery behind the gate of Přerov.

There is no written record of a Jewish community before 1560 since a fire destroyed a lot of written evidence. The Thirty Years' War damaged the town of Holešov, as well as the Jewish community.

When Count Jan Rottal bought the estate, the Jews gained privileges and the importance and the size of the community was allowed to grow.

Further problems the community and the town had to face came at the time of Austro-Prussian War in the 18th century. The situation for the Jews then changed with the events of 1848. **In the second half of 19th century, the Jews had the possibility to get tightly involved with the industrial and social development of the whole society.** The relationship of the inhabitants was not, however, ideal. The Jewish community faced several pogroms and riots, e.g. during the reign of Marie Theresia they were accused of teaming up with the hostile Prussians and their leaders were imprisoned in consequence. In 1774, the Jewish ghetto was plundered after a murder of a Christian girl; in 1850 riots burst out against the Jews inhabiting the town centre. In 1899, a few aggressors were killed after having attacked the ghetto. The notorious pogrom from December 3rd and 4th 1918 was the last but just as violent as two Jewish inhabitants were killed during the attacks. The Jewish community was expanding despite a great number of riots and violence aimed against the Jews. For example in 1674, there were 329 houses of Christian families and 48 Jewish houses. In 1794, 554 Christian families lived in 256 houses while 194 Jewish families lived in 49 houses. **The greatest number of Jews that was recorded in 1848 was 1694 people,** 32% of inhabitants. Later, the community decreased as a result of social changes when the young ones left for the bigger cities and better opportunities. However, the end of Jewish community in Holešov was caused by the Nazi genocide. **Over 250 Jewish inhabitants from Holešov died in the concentration camps** and only 14 of them came back with their health ruined. This was the end to the Jewish community in Holešov.



The Šach Synagogue has been a social and spiritual centre for the community. The Synagogue in Holešov was built in the middle of the Jewish district as a place for communal worship and for the education of young people. According to the sources, the so-called **old synagogue was built in 1560** on the site of a former sanctuary which had been destroyed by fire. The written evidence is given on the wall of the main room. The architectural shape of the building and the outside walls was set at the time of Renaissance. In 1615, the synagogue gained a new hall to the main room on the ground floor and the separate women's section on the balcony. Further reconstructions were only allowed after 1725 when the prayer room was topped by a new vault, the windows near the women's balcony were redesigned and a new staircase and a hall were added. The rebuilding was finished by 1737 with the interior having been decorated in the homogenous Baroque style. Then, the synagogue remained unchanged serving as a centre for the community and the communal prayer until the beginning of 20th century. Later, a new synagogue was built in Holešov and the older one was used as a place for Orthodox Jews and then even as a repository, a joinery and also as a flat. Due to its fading importance, **it escaped the Nazi attention during World War II.** After 1960, the building was completely reconstructed, with the murals having been uncovered and restored. It has been open to public since 1964 providing the exhibition about the Jews in the Moravian region. Further reconstructions took place in 1993 – 1995. The updated exhibition and the reconstructed premises are a popular tourist destination.

The Šach Synagogue is a detached three-storey building of rectangular shape with two staircases, the main prayer hall and the vestibule, the women's balcony on the first floor, and the House of Talmud Study on the second floor.

It is interesting that this consecrated building is not directly facing the east but rather, the north-east. The floor of the main room is one metre under the contemporary ground level in accordance with the traditional rules. The rectangular vestibule with segmental barrel vault and the main nave are separated by two half-circle vaulted arcades. The women's section on the balcony is separated from the main prayer room as there are two vaulted indoor openings or windows. The main sanctuary is topped by co called church vault.

The raised octagonal platform called **bimah** (a place from which the Torah is read) is in the middle of the main prayer room and there are two staircases leading to it. The Rococo railing decoration of the bimah gives evidence to the

mastery of the local smiths of the 18th century. Then there is the Holy Ark, Aron ha Kodesh, where the Torah scrolls were kept, on the eastern side of the prayer room. Here, it took the shape of a Baroque altar with the stucco decoration coming from the beginning of the 18th century. Some walls and vaults are decorated by the inscriptions in Hebrew and by the ornamental, floral and fruit motives influenced by the local folklore art. It is considered to be the work of Polish Jew immigrants dating back before 1737. There are wooden synagogue pews and eight mural panels with liturgical texts in Hebrew. The valuable ornamental decoration can be also seen on the first and second floor. The women's balcony is a flat-roofed room decorated by liturgical texts and ornamental paintings. The room above, the Talmud Torah School, with wooden open-beam ceiling, is also richly ornamented. The exterior of the synagogue was kept rather simple when compared to the adornment of the interior. It has been attributed to the former inhabitants' consensus for a Jewish building not to attract too much attention and not to be higher than the Christian buildings. **The Šach Synagogue in Holešov is one of the oldest** (the second to the synagogue in Lipník nad Bečvou), the most precious and best preserved sight of its kind **in the Czech Republic.** Currently, it is owned by the Jewish Community of Brno and is run by the Tourist Information Centre in Holešov.

THE NEW SYNAGOGUE

A new synagogue was built in the second half of 19th century as the old one had not been sufficient enough for the growing Jewish population in the town. The plan was made by a prominent **Viennese architect Jakob Gartner** and the works in the oriental style began in 1891 on the square "náměstí Svobody" as it is known today. **It was consecrated 3rd September 1893.** A Rabbi's house and a winter prayer hall were also built right next to it. However, the destiny of the New Synagogue was unfortunate. It was set on fire on 24th July 1941 during the Nazi occupation. The fire was put out by the firemen. With the second effort to ignite the synagogue, nobody was allowed to take any action. **It was burnt down on 12th August 1941.** The remains of the stones and bricks were taken apart for further use. Nowadays, a memorial stone is placed in the position of the former synagogue. The model of the synagogue can be seen in the Šach Synagogue.

The New Synagogue was a one-storey detached building with a low hip roof. The outer size was 27m to 17m. The height was 11m up to the roof ledge and 16m up to its turrets. Even this sacred place was not positioned exactly according to the rules for the synagogue. The space was lit by big half-circle windows with stained glass. The façade was decorated by fine oriental motives.

