

# Prague Spring 1990, part III: Is this Czech Jewry's last chance?

By YOSSEI KLEIN HALEVI

PRAGUE—On a stone wall at the entrance to the old Jewish cemetery are engraved these Hebrew words: "Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of mirth, for that is the end of every man."

Few of the Hebrew inscriptions on the thin rounded tombstones are legible anymore. The stones are chipped and cracked and covered with moss. They lean forward and back, as if someone had tried to extract them from the earth.

What remains of Jewish life in Prague is gathered on the two narrow cobblestone streets around the cemetery. Here are the Altneu synagogue, the Jewish Museum and the Jewish community building with its fanciful pink facade. Hitler had intended these two streets to form the core of his museum of an extinguished race, and perhaps he succeeded. On any day, these streets are filled with tourists who come to see the artifacts of a dead culture.

Of the 6,000 registered members of the Czech Jewish community, nearly all are elderly. In the last 10 years there have been 300 deaths in the Prague community, and four births. The few dozen young people who have found their way to Judaism are a remarkable group, but by themselves they will not be able to form a future community.

No one knows how many Jews actually live in Czechoslovakia. As everywhere else in Eastern Europe, there are many more Jews and part-Jews than the official community has listed as members. The Communist "anti-Zionist" purges that immediately followed the Holocaust forced most of the country's surviving Jews to emigrate; some of those who remained changed their Jewish names and tried to pass. For the first time in 50 years, those people, or their children, may feel safe enough to emerge as Jews.

One Sunday afternoon, while walking in the cemetery, I met a man named Jan. We found ourselves sharing a rare secluded spot away from the tourists. Jan was in his early 40s, with a paunch and a goatee and sad eyes. He told me he was helping a friend to photograph the stones, for a book on the cemetery. He said, "After the revolution, it is now possible to publish such a book."

For a while we made the kind of small talk that Czechs and foreigners exchange these days in Prague. I asked him if he had participated in the anti-government demonstrations and he said, "Only when I saw that the Communists wouldn't be coming with guns. In the beginning, when the students demonstrated, I didn't let my boys go out into the streets. I am from the generation of 1968. We are very pessimistic."

I had finally found a timid Czech. It was hard to recall, after the great demonstrations of November 1989, that for 20 years most Czechs had passively adapted to Communist rule. The dissidents I spoke with had been surprised by the massive involvement in the revolution: some said that the



The Jewish Cemetery in Prague's Jewish Quarter.

*The stones in the Jewish Cemetery lean forward and back, as if someone had tried to extract them from the earth.*

real miracle was not the collapse of Communist power but the unexpected courage of the Czechs.

Jan works as the local representative of a French chemical company. His job requires that he travel to France every two months. For a Czech under communism, that had been an unimaginable gift. And yet, in his quiet way, he seemed an unhappy man.

I asked him if this was his first visit to the Jewish cemetery. He said, "Since the revolution, I've come here several times on Sunday mornings. We have a group that cleans the cemetery. This morning I came with my boys."

Only then did it occur to me that Jan might be a Jew. I asked him if he was and he said, "I'm not and I am. My parents were Jews. My father was in Oswiecim"—using the Polish name for Auschwitz, a reminder of how far east we were. "After the war he stopped being a Jew. I wasn't raised as a Jew at all. I know nothing about it. I don't believe in God."

Then he said: "But since the revolution I've gone twice to the Jewish community. Before, I never went. It wasn't possible."

Of course it was possible: other young people had done so. But Jan knew that someone in his position had to be entirely above suspicion; a member of the Jewish community

would not have been allowed to travel abroad every two months. Jan had opted for the Czech version of the good life over the risks of an unfamiliar Jewish identity. But he rationalized his choice by claiming that he had not made any choice at all, that it had simply been impossible to be a Jew.

Jan said: "Now my oldest son goes to the community. There is a youth group that meets there." And then the conversation faltered. Jan didn't know what else to say. Was it good that his son was becoming part of the community? What would it mean for Jan to be the son of a Jew and the father of a Jew, but not to be a Jew himself?

We exchanged some more small talk. Jan asked me what I had thought of the revolution, and I said what foreigners are expected to say: how much we on the outside admire the courage of the Czech people. I added, "And God also helped." Though he had told me he was an atheist, it didn't seem an inappropriate thing for one Jew to say to another in a cemetery.

Jan nodded solemnly. "Yes," he said, "the God also helped."

## Something special

Vladimir Merta, the folksinger and guitarist for Prague's Jewish choir,

Misphacha, said to me, "If you want to find out about Czech Jews, speak to my wife, Lucie. She will have a lot to say." But when I called Lucie, she seemed startled at the idea. "Vladimir said we should meet? But what would I say to you?"

Lucie, in her early 40s, has the sad, generous smile of someone who has overcome great suffering. Her spare face is delicate, but not fragile. She seemed like someone who is always prepared to trust, not because she is innocent but because she is good.

On her dining room wall hangs a painting of a prisoner in a striped uniform. He looked down at Lucie's table with hungry eyes; I wondered if he had been placed there deliberately, to warn diners against complacency. In the bathroom is a poster—Vladimir's humor—of a roll of toilet paper made of the masthead of *Rude Pravo*, the Communist government's official newspaper.

I asked Lucie to tell me something about her life under communism, and she said: "I was not an active dissident. My struggle was simply not to cooperate in any way with the regime. I tried not to join any Communist institution. I never attended 'ideological meetings.' People said to me, 'It's dangerous to refuse, you must go.' But I couldn't bear it."

"At one point the secret police tried to get me to collaborate. I was

working for a Japanese journalist, and they wanted me to spy on him. They told me, 'Either you collaborate or you will lose your job, and your university studies will be finished.' This pressure went on for half a year. I was so stupid: I went to their meetings every month. I didn't realize that the best way to end the pressure was simply to refuse to meet with them. Instead I tried to explain that I liked the Japanese journalist and didn't want to spy on a man that I liked.

"My father had given me bad advice. He said: You mustn't tell them anything rude. Finally I decided, at whatever cost, not to behave politely anymore. The last time I met with them I said, 'I'm ready to be thrown out of university and lose my job.' They stopped calling me. And nothing happened—not at my job and not at the university. The biggest weapon of the Communists was fear; they were masters at creating fear. But once I showed them that I wasn't afraid, they didn't do a thing to me."

Ten years later, long after Lucie had stopped working for the Japanese journalist, she received a summons from the police to appear with her driver's license, which the summons said was "under investigation." A policeman asked her: "Are you ready to collaborate now? Will you go back to work for the journalist?" Now Lucie understood the implicit threat of the summons: if she would not cooperate, they would confiscate her driver's license. Lucie placed her license and her other personal documents on the table, and said, "I'm not collaborating. Good-bye." Confused by her boldness, the policeman called out, "Wait! You forgot your papers!" And they never bothered her again.

Lucie's father was a Communist; not until she was 15 did she learn that he was also a Jew. A malicious neighbor revealed the secret to her, as a taunt. Lucie was surprised, but not upset. "I said to myself, 'So that is the missing piece.'"

As a child, Lucie had sensed that the details of her life didn't fully make sense. Why had her father's entire family disappeared? And why hadn't her father ever spoken about his parents and his childhood? Lucie asked him now to tell her about his Jewish past, but he still refused.

Finally, several years later, when he thought he was dying, he revealed to Lucie the story of his life. He had broken with Judaism before the war and joined the Communist Party. Then he fought the Nazis with a Communist partisan unit, was captured and sent to Auschwitz. After the war he discovered that he was the only member of his family to survive. He changed his name, married a non-Jewish woman and tried to forget that he was a Jew.

Lucie read a book about Israel, and was intrigued with the country's debate over "Who is a Jew." According to the Orthodox, she, the daughter of a non-Jewish mother, is not a Jew. But other Israelis believe that a Jew is anyone who feels part of the Jewish

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# Prague

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 people. "I said to myself, 'Maybe I can feel myself to be a Jew.'"

For many years her curiosity about Judaism remained in the background. Lucie became a psychotherapist and a translator of English novels into Czech. Then, one day, a friend invited her to come to a rehearsal of Mishpacha. Lucie fell in love with the hasidic music she heard there, and she wanted to learn about the world from which that music had come. But the official Jewish community was closed and forbidding, so Mishpacha became Lucie's Jewish community.

She said: "There is something special in Prague about being a Jew. I think my husband regrets not being a Jew. For intelligent people here, a Jew means someone educated, spiritual and with a strong history and identity."

Vladimir came home and joined our conversation. I asked him and Lucie what kind of Jewish community they wanted to see in post-Communist Prague.

Vladimir said: "We need a rabbi like Karol Sidon. He is the Jewish Havel." Karol Sidon is a dissident writer and unofficial teacher of Judaism, who had gone into exile under the Communist regime.

"I don't expect anything from the old people in the community," Vladimir said. "The old people don't really want any revival of Jewish culture. They just want kosher meals and sentimental music on Hanukkah and to spend the rest of their lives in quiet. The survivors of the Holocaust are frightened people. When Mishpacha was founded, the leaders of the community sent a list of our members to

the Ministry of the Interior. They asked me to stop playing with the choir. 'We appreciate your identifying with us,' they said to me, 'but you're not one of us. You'll only cause us problems.'"

Lucie said: "I want a Jewish community that is open to everyone."

"Except goyim," said Vladimir.  
 "No, everyone. A Jewish community like Mishpacha, Jews and non-Jews together. Anyone who likes to sing with us, anyone who feels connected to Jewish culture, is welcome to join us. I don't want to be part of a closed community. If the Jewish community is closed, I won't have the courage to go there."

## Modest renewal

It was a time of possibility. One morning I was riding a trolley with Hanna Pavlat, when she said, excitedly, "Look at that poster." On a billboard outside our window was a large poster announcing a cantorial concert. I had seen the poster in the Jewish community building: cantors from America coming to sing, as Vladimir Merta would say, sentimental songs to the old Jews of Prague. "So what?" I said to Hanna. "There is a menorah on that sign," she said. "It is the first time in my life that I see a Jewish symbol in the street."

The combination of circumstances—a sympathetic government, a Judeophilic intelligentsia, a tentative interest in Judaism by long-assimilated Jews—is right for a modest Jewish renewal. This is Czech Jewry's last chance. If it succeeds, it can create a community whose importance will be far greater than its numbers. A living Jewish community in Prague, with strong ties to the nation's intelligentsia, will prove that Jews can thrive in the new Eastern Europe, perhaps even become a

bridge between the region and world Jewry.

But is this Jewish community, for so long used to the idea of its own demise, psychologically prepared for the opportunity? The old secular leadership—police collaborators Heller and Kraus—have been replaced by decent people. But the spiritual leadership remains the same.

For Czech Jews, "spiritual leadership" means one man: Rabbi Daniel Mayer. Mayer was the chief rabbi—the only rabbi—of Czechoslovakia. I knew I had to interview him, but everything I had heard about him made me put it off to the last possible moment. Two years ago, Rabbi Mayer had given in to police pressure and signed a public statement denouncing the dissident movement as "anti-socialist." A man without courage is not worthy of leading a community whose members include Jirka Danicek and Leo and Hanna Pavlat (see parts one and two). Clearly, such a rabbi could not inspire Lucie and Vladimir Merta.

Daniel Mayer's large office was on the first floor of the Jewish community building. In one corner lay a box filled with used high-heel shoes. Hanna Pavlat, who came with me to the meeting, said, "Look what the rich Jews of America send us. They think we are Romania." A Torah ark, covered with a velvet curtain, sat against a wall, as if this room were a synagogue. Before the ark lay a case of empty soda bottles.

Daniel Mayer is a little round man with a full face, thick lips, a short black beard and a black fedora. His eyes are sleepy, heavy-lidded. At age 32 he has the mannerisms of an old man. Most of his sentences seemed to end in shrugs. Sometimes he lapsed into mumbles, as though he doubted the value of his own words. He avoided looking at me, staring instead at

the floor; when I happened to catch his eye he quickly turned away.

We spoke together in Hebrew. I asked, "Was it difficult for you as a rabbi to function under the Communist government?" He said, "I don't want to talk about what was. What was, was. Finished. I don't like sensations." Shrug.

"Did you have to censor yourself when you spoke in the synagogue?"

"I didn't speak politics. A rabbi has to speak about religion, not politics. Maybe a little politics. Every man must know what's permitted and what isn't. You have to know what's good for the Jews. Let's say I would have made a big speech for Zionism. What would it have accomplished? Problems for me, problems for my family, problems for the Jews. So?"

"Do you consider yourself a Zionist?"

"I don't say 'Zionist.'" He mumbled something inaudible. Then he said, "I don't like Meir Kahane."

"But not all Zionists are like Meir Kahane, rabbi."

He abruptly changed position. "Tell me," he said, "which Jew isn't a Zionist? Even the [anti-Zionist] Satmar hasidim are Zionists." He laughed. "But you don't have to write that in the newspaper. They'll make noise about me."

"The biggest Zionists don't have to show the goyim that they're Zionists. In my speeches in the synagogue I said words in support of Israel. But you have to know how. Once, on Tisha b'Av [the fast day for the destruction of the Temple], I said, 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem.' There was nothing there against communism. I wasn't against the government, I wasn't against the state."

So deeply had fear penetrated this man that he was trying to reassure me, a visitor from Israel—and four months after the revolution—that a

Jew's love for Jerusalem is not anti-communist.

He said: "I do things quietly. You have to know how to help the community. Even if it isn't who knows what. To be a rabbi, you have to take an oath of loyalty to the government. So I did. I'm not a hero. To sit four years in prison like Havel. If you, in America, write against Bush—okay, you don't have to be afraid of the police. But he'll do what he wants, not what you want." Mayer laughed, pleased to have made his point: that it was futile to think you could change the power structure. This was said in Prague, in the spring of 1990.

"Did you ever get called for an interrogation, Rabbi Mayer?"

"In 1986, I got a call from a man at the Ministry of Culture. He said to me, 'Excuse me, rabbi, but did you just celebrate the holiday of Shavuot?' 'Yes,' I said, 'Shavuot.' 'And did you make a speech on Shavuot in the synagogue?' 'Yes, I made a speech.' 'Do you have time to come see me?' 'Yes, I have time.' We sat, we drank coffee, we smoked a cigarette. Then he said, 'We heard that you made a Zionist speech on Shavuot.' So I showed him a copy of the speech. I said to him, 'Did you find anything Zionist in there?' 'No.' 'Okay, goodbye.' This man was a big Communist. He could have made trouble. But he looked for the truth, not to hear it second-hand."

Mayer was so pleased by this story of Communist decency and his own cleverness that he recounted for me another one of his small victories. He said: "Two years ago, Heller, the president of the community, made a speech. I don't know what—politics, Jews in Russia—"

"Was it when Heller said that Soviet Jews weren't being persecuted?"

"I don't know, something. He wanted it on the front page of our newspaper. I went to the Ministry of Religion and said, 'It's Hanukkah this month. In the month of Christmas would you tell Catholics to publish politics on the front page of their newspaper and not something about Christmas?' 'You know,' they said to me, 'you're right.' I told them the comparison with Christmas; then they understood! So we had Hanukkah on the front page and Heller on the inside."

"Was it difficult for you to function as a rabbi with the police always looking over your shoulder?"

"Police, police. Don't always say police, but of the people on the second floor." Mayer meant the two former leaders of the community, Heller and Kraus, whose offices had been upstairs. Mayer looked up, as if they were sitting directly above his head.

"Were you ever forced by the government to make anti-Zionist statements?"

"They made some, not me." He looked up: the people on the second floor.

"What about?"

"Nonsense, do I know? Something about the American attack on Libya. Against imperialism. A big foolishness." He waved his hand: irrelevant.

"Did you participate in the anti-government demonstrations in November?"

"I don't like to make noise. But I

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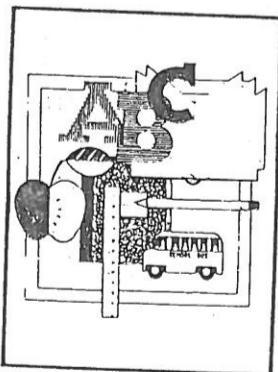
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said that he had been paid by the police only once. And he claimed that he had not betrayed anyone in the community. Mayer himself suggested that he be removed from his position as chief rabbi, and the executive board of the Czech Jewish community, meeting in emergency session, agreed. Leo Pavlat, who is a member of the executive, told me: "I wasn't in Daniel Mayer's place and I can't be his judge. But it is clear that he couldn't continue as the spiritual head of our community. I want to believe him when he says he

didn't betray any of us. If we really wanted to know the truth we could ask the government to show us the police files. But I don't think anyone in the community is interested in doing that." The Jewish community has invited Karol Sidon, the writer and former dissident, to take Mayer's place; Sidon has agreed. This fall he will begin rabbinical training in a Jerusalem yeshiva, and in three years he will return to Prague as the community's new chief rabbi. "For the next three years, the com-

munity will be without a rabbi, and this will be a very difficult time," Leo Pavlat said. "But when Karol returns it will be very good. He has proven his spiritual and moral qualities. He was one of the signers of Charter '77, and is a close friend of Havel's. He was part of this country's intellectual elite. He is not only someone who studies what others say about Judaism; he has his own ideas. He is very creative. He will attract young people and intellectuals to Judaism. I think he will be the best thing that could happen to the Czech Jewish community." □



Vladimir Merta.

*'We appreciate your identifying with us,' they said, 'but you'll only cause us problems.'*

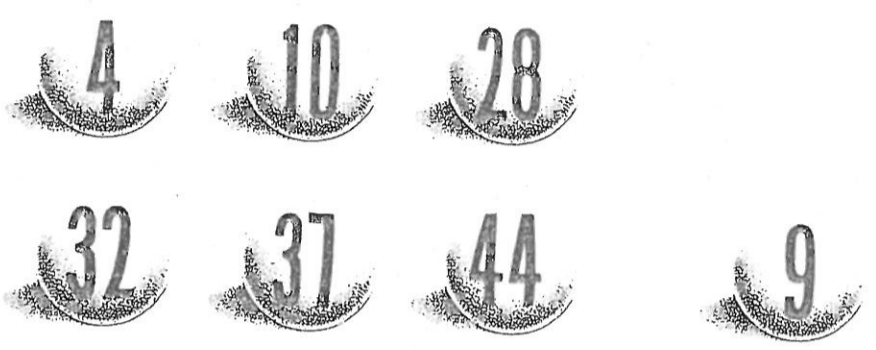
went once, to look, to learn, to listen." "Were you happy when the government fell?" "Listen: I was happy, I wasn't happy." "It didn't matter to you if the revolution succeeded or failed?" "Of course it mattered. But I'm not a revolutionary." "Don't you find your job easier now than before the revolution?" "Now will be harder than before. Before, I knew what was allowed, what was not allowed." "Rabbi Mayer, do you mean to tell me that the situation for Jews is not better now than it was under the Communists?" "It's better. Before, Kraus and Heller didn't let me speak to foreigners; now I can talk to you. But we have new problems. Now the anti-Semites can say what they want against us and say, 'Democracy.'" "But under communism you had a government that trained Arab terrorists and taught young Czechs that Israel was like Nazi Germany." "All right, it was politics, what can

you do. But they didn't write 'Dirty Jews' on the wall." "Rabbi Mayer, what is your vision of a future Jewish community?" "What," he said, and then loudly exhaled. "We need young people to come to the community. There's nothing to be afraid of now. We need to bring in Bnei Akiva," referring to the religious Zionist youth movement. "So you're ready to be an open Zionist, Rabbi Mayer." He shrugged and said, "Not exactly a Zionist."

*Postscript*

After I left Czechoslovakia, early this summer, Rabbi Daniel Mayer publicly admitted to having been a police collaborator. His confession came after the new government had discovered documents linking Mayer to the secret police. Mayer said he had been forced to sign an agreement with the police in exchange for permission to attend the rabbinical seminary in Budapest, where he was ordained. He

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