



Prague: Jewish

then
and now



Prague:emotion



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Cover photo: Old-New Synagogue
◀ Inside the Jerusalem Synagogue



photo: © Prague City Archives

The portal of the Jewish Town Hall

Prague's Jewish aspects

Prague is a magical city, reflecting its eleven centuries of history. Its cultural and architectural development has always borne the mark of its inhabitants. The cultural richness of this Royal and Imperial Seat also brought with it a wealth of artistic influences. Prague's place as a cross-roads of various political and power interests, melding together all sorts of spiritual currents, a meeting point for merchants and artists from all over the world, has given the city its distinctive face today.

Ever since the 10th century, when the Jewish merchant Abraham ben Jacob described Prague as a *city of stone and lime*, it had its Jewish settlement. The significance of Jews in Prague is evident to this day.

The formation of a Jewish Town was preceded by the first Jewish merchants making their homes near Prague Castle, and along the Vyšehrad route. Since ancient times, the ford across the Vltava River below Prague Castle played an important role in city life, connecting the trade routes on both its banks. It was right here that a Jewish community sprang up, from the end of the 11th century, though its origins are obscured by the mists of time. Only the 13th century brought the Jewish settlement under the legal protection of the then **Czech King, Přemysl Otakar II**. Prague Jews were indeed under **direct Royal governance** over the centuries.

Perhaps the fact that Jews came to Prague from different places helped the **formation of two distinct centres of Jewish settlement**. One around the Old School (today's Spanish Synagogue) and the other by the Old-New Synagogue. This was the real heart of the medieval Jewish ghetto. The merging of the two settlements was obstructed by the Benedictine enclave of St George at Prague Castle that included the Church of the Holy Spirit, whose Gothic profile can be seen right by the Spanish Synagogue.



The Old Jewish Cemetery (1825)

photo: © Prague City Archives

development, including having streets paved at his expense, and building the Jewish Town Hall and several Synagogues.

Also active at that time in the Prague ghetto was the **legendary Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel**, also known as **Rabbi Löw**, or the **Maharal**. He initiated the first private rabbinical college in Prague, the Klausen, later heading up the Rabbinical Court and the famous yeshiva (Talmud academy). He is at the centre of many legends, oft evoked by visiting the Old-New Synagogue or the Old Jewish Cemetery.

There was another prominent figure in imperial service later – **Jacob Bassevi**. He too played a key role in the Prague ghetto's fortunes on the cusp of the Thirty Years' War. During the turmoil after the defeated Bohemian Revolt he secured the Jewish Town's expansion.

Prague – Old Town (1606)



photo: © Prague City Archives

The loyalty of Prague Jews was abundantly shown during the siege of Prague by the Swedes at the end of the Thirty Years' War, greatly helping to repel the would-be invaders.

The Legend of the Golem

The name of Rabbi Löw is particularly associated with the Legend of the Golem, **an artificial being made of clay**, tasked with protecting the Jewish ghetto and doing heavy work. Its maker was the Maharal himself. Only he could breathe life into the Golem, by way of a Shem formula, as the Golem only took orders from his maker and keeper of the Shem. Once after the Golem started wrecking everything around him, the summoned Rabbi shut him down forever. And the Golem? He has crumbled to dust, or is up in the Old-New Synagogue loft.

The 18th century in the Prague ghetto

A less-than-happy period in the history of Prague Jews was the end of the 17th century, marred by **plague epidemics** as well as a **huge fire** in 1689 that brought unprecedented destruction. At that time, more than three hundred houses burned down in the ghetto, and more beyond, in the Old Town of Prague. But the life of the Jewish Town did not come to a standstill. Far from it. Gradually, all the temples were renewed, the Town Hall rebuilt, even ordinary houses saw major change. Although the ghetto could no longer expand, literally every inch of the space got used.

View of the façade of the Church of St Gall and the Jewish Tandlermarkt (c. 1740)

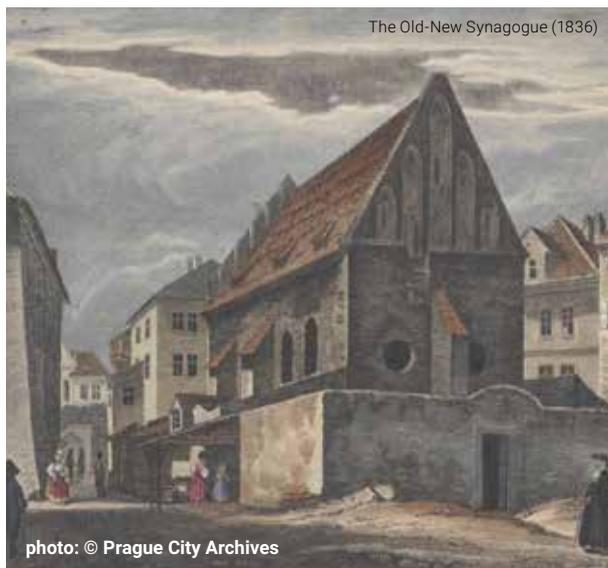


photo: © Prague City Archives

With the 18th century came many unpleasant surprises for the Prague Jewish Community. The **Familianten Gesetz** of 1726 set the *numerus clausus*, an exact and immutable limit on Jewish families, which in practice meant only the eldest son could marry. But the worst edict came from Maria Theresa, who in 1744 evicted the entire Jewish population, not just from Prague but from the whole of the Bohemian Kingdom. Although she later revoked this edict in the face of major financial losses, the population of the ghetto reduced markedly.

The Josephine reforms

When visiting the Jewish Town, let us not overlook why this quarter changed its name. Under its new name of Josefov it became a part of Prague in 1850. The name comes from the **Habsburg Emperor Joseph II**, whose enlightened reforms initiated a **gradual process of emancipation and modernisation of Jewish society**. The reform did not remove the Familianten, but did repeal various demeaning restrictions (e.g. the wearing of a Jewish tag) and gave Jews access to previously barred professions. The Jews became eligible for secular education and study at the universities. Included under the Imperial decrees was German-style self-government and the adoption of permanent Germanic surnames.



The Emancipation of the Jews

The mid-19th century revolutionary events brought further emancipation. The Jews actually began to leave the ghetto, given the option to acquire real estate, setting up manufacturing and buying houses. Hand in hand with these changes came, slowly but surely, the **definitive destruction of the ghetto**. The old-timer residents were leaving, the houses fell into disrepair and the whole area was becoming an overpopulated refuge for the poor, devoid of basic sanitation. Add to this the increasing demands on housing and a municipal initiative to streamline transport and regulate the nearby river; it was only a matter of time before a **radical redevelopment was decreed**. It took place in the last decade of the 19th century. No Medieval, Renaissance or Baroque buildings of the ghetto remain today. They have been replaced by showy town houses, built and funded after the Jewish quarter was razed.

Redevelopment of the Jewish ghetto

The landmark year of the Jewish ghetto 'sanitization' redevelopment was 1893. After historical-building demolition laws were passed, not only houses, but several Synagogues were torn down. By city hall decision, **the late 19th century saw Josefov transformed**. Its former narrow lanes were demolished and replaced by wide and spacious boulevards of today's Pařížská, Maiselova, Široká and adjacent streets. An eclectic style with elements of Art Nouveau typifies the vast majority of houses from the first decades of the 20th century. Whilst the once picturesque ghetto has irretrievably gone, fortunately the most important Synagogues and the Old Jewish Cemetery remain.



As in Josefov, significant changes took place throughout Prague. **Many Jewish families settled in Vinohrady, Smíchov, and Karlín**, although they dispersed to virtually all Prague suburbs at the time. The 'royal' Vinohrady quarter of the late 19th Century saw the building of a **monumental Synagogue, the largest in the Habsburg monarchy**. A much more modestly-scaled oratory was built in the Smíchov district. While the Vinohrady Synagogue was destroyed by bombing in the last months of World War II, the Smíchov Synagogue has survived to this day.

View along Dušní street in Josefov (1911)



The ghetto may have been lost for good, but Prague's Jewish Community was on the up. With that came **more overt antisemitism** in Czech society. It was the time of a **significant Jewish intelligentsia** forming; of writers, literary scholars, scientists, painters, sculptors, architects and other artists. After the founding of Czechoslovakia, many were very much a part of the cultural life of the new State. Among the most notable: Franz Kafka, Max Brod, Eduard Bass, Karel Poláček, Egon Erwin Kisch, Robert Guttmann, Otto Gutfreund, et al.

Prague Jews during World War II

In democratic prewar Czechoslovakia, the Jews enjoyed civic equality, mostly assimilated into society. All of this changed with the Munich Agreement and the **Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia**. So-called Nuremberg laws were introduced, allowing the **legalized persecution of Jews**: stripped of property, of options to exercise their profession, gradually excluded from all areas of civic life. Their registration and humiliation, tagging with the Star of David was a prelude to mass deportations and the **'final solution' of the Jewish question**. The Terezín ghetto became a transit way-point on a journey to oblivion for most Czech and Moravian Jews. From here, trains took them to ghettos, concentration camps and extermination centres in the East – the territory of the 'Generalgouvernement'; Latvia, Estonia and Belarus. The fate of Prague's Jews was no different. Most of the 44,000 Prague Jews fell victim to Nazi racial policy. They are commemorated by the **Czech and Moravian Jewish victims of Shoah memorial** in the Pinkas Synagogue.

World War II transport of Jews passing through Bohušovice en route to Terezín (winter 1941 or 1942); photo: © Jewish Museum in Prague



Fortunately, Jewish cultural landmarks outlasted the horrors of WWII. Some of them became the only refuge for the safekeeping of liturgical objects from the prior places of worship shut-down throughout the protectorate.

Prague's Jewish history is richly diverse. Indeed, it represents **more than a thousand years of Jewish presence in Prague**, lasting to this day.

View into Šamesova street in Prague from above (c. 1895)



photo: © Prague City Archives

Essential Jewish concepts



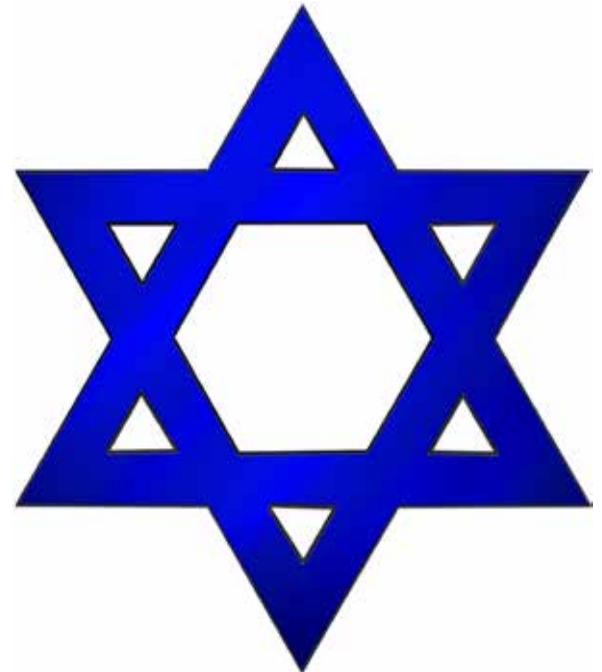
...that you are likely to encounter when visiting Jewish sights.

Bima or almemor

A raised podium, usually in the middle of the main hall of the Synagogue, dedicated to prayer. On the bima stands the table or counter for reading from the Torah. In a traditional Synagogue the bima is separated from other areas by railings. The congregation prayer in the Synagogue is led by the **hazzan** or **cantor** – the man who typically reads from the Torah.

Star of David (Magen David)

David's shield is the most famous symbol of Judaism, commonly seen from the 16th century onward. The hexagram made by two intersecting equilateral triangles was widely regarded as a symbol of life and thanks to the alchemists often as a symbol of magic. The Star of David is found in many places. It adorns ritual objects, but also features on tombstones or architecture. The importance of the Star of David was compromised by the Nazis, when Jews had to be tagged visibly with the yellow star, bearing the word "Jude".



Ten Commandments

The tablets with the ten commandments God gave to the people to guide them. The tablets were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, to give to the people of Israel. The tablets of the Ten Commandments symbolize Judaism, and often appear in artistic designs adorning the Synagogue, the Torah ark cover and ritual objects.

Hanukkah

The Feast of Dedication, or the Festival of Lights, is a moveable eight-day holiday, typically in December. It recalls not only how the Jews defeated the troops of King Antiochus of the Seleucid in the Maccabean Revolt, but also the miracle of the oil in the Temple.

Hannukiah

An eight or nine-branched candlestick, integral to the Hanukkah Festival of Lights. On each festive day, another light is lit. The Hanukkah menorah often has the ninth, auxiliary branch known as the helper (Shamash).

Kipa, or yarmulke

The traditional Jewish head covering, originally worn by Jewish men when at prayer, and when studying the Torah. In the course of the 16th and 17th century, daily wearing of the kipa became customary, and eventually, a standard part of men's attire.

i *When visiting the Jewish monuments in Prague, please ask for, and wear the kipa, or at least its symbolic paper semblance, which you will receive when entering the sites.*



Menorah

A seven-branched candlestick, one of the largest and oldest symbols of Judaism, also featured on the coat-of-arms of Israel. The candlestick stands for the Creation, but also the Burning Bush that Moses saw on Mount Sinai, as recounted in the Torah.



Mezuzah

The symbol of every Jewish House is located on the right of the door frame. It is a decorative case, typically of metal. It holds a strip of parchment, the kief, inscribed with two specific verses from the Torah.



Mikveh (Mikvah)

A ritual Jewish bath, typically built near a Synagogue. It serves for the ritual cleansing of people or objects. It consists of a stone reservoir with clean natural and flowing water, deep enough to submerge a grown man.

Pesach/Passover – Feast of Unleavened Bread

The ancient pilgrimage feast commemorating the Jewish exodus from Egyptian slavery. The Diaspora celebrate it for eight days. It includes the eating of Matzo – unleavened bread.

Rabbi

The spiritual leader and also advisor and teacher of the Jewish community. His spiritual authority is delegated, and his decisions follow the Halakha – combining Jewish religious law, custom and traditions.

Rosh Hashanah, the New Year holiday

The Jewish New Year falls on the 1st and 2nd days of Tishrei, i.e. according to the Gregorian calendar, between September and October. An essential feature of the feast is blowing the ram's horn, the Shofar. Its sound recalls God's covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai.

Synagogue (Beit Knesset)

The Jewish temple, an important symbol of the Jewish community. The main religious and social focus of the Jewish community, originally the House of Prayer and Assembly, which also initially served as the school. The Synagogues began to emerge after the destruction of the first Temple of Jerusalem (586 BCE).

Shabbat – day of rest and gladness

The greatest holiday in Judaism, the seventh day of the week, kept as mandated by the Ten Commandments. It belongs among the biblical Holy days prescribed by the Torah. The Shabbat begins on

Friday evening at sunset and ends by first star-light on Saturday evening. On this day, traditional practices apply, incl. the prohibition of certain activities and physical work. The Shabbat is also a time for family togetherness.

Talmud

The core text of Judaism, a volume of Rabbinic discussions. It has two parts – the Mishnah and the Gemara.

Torah – the principal document and codex of Judaism

A parchment scroll bearing hand-transcribed biblical texts of the Five Books of Moses. In printed form, this 'Pentateuch' (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) with other texts (Prophets, Writings) comprises the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh. The oral tradition, the oral Torah, is captured in the Talmud (Mishnah + Gemara) and the Midrash.



– The Ark of the Torah, or tabernacle (Aron Kodesh)

The tabernacle is kept in the Synagogue by an Eastward wall, toward Jerusalem. Inside are stored one or more scrolls of the Torah. The highly decorated Ark is set on high ground, typically reached by steps. The doors of the tabernacle are double-leaf, behind a protective shroud. Above the tabernacle hangs an eternal light.

– Scroll of the Torah (Sefer Torah)

The parchment scroll with the text of the Torah, strictly traditionally

handwritten. It is rolled on two wooden handles. If the Torah is stored in the tabernacle, the curled-up parchment is corded by a swathing band. It is further protected by a mantle and decorated with a shield, a pointer, two finials and a crown.

Tumba – tomb

One of the forms of burial seen in the Old Jewish Cemetery and other Jewish cemeteries in Prague. More often, the tombs are only individual gravestones (Maceva). Tombs were used for the interment of noted scholars, rabbis or other important figures of the Prague ghetto. The decoration on gravestones or tombs references Jewish symbolism, designating the family, profession, characteristics of the deceased, etc. The Old Testament command that the human face not be depicted is adhered to.



Old Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov,
with the TV tower in the background





Inside the Spanish Synagogue

Synagogues

The Old-New Synagogue

📍 Červená st., Prague 1 – Old Town 🌐 www.synagogue.cz
🏢 managed by: The Jewish Community of Prague
🕒 apart from Sat and other Jewish holidays, Sun-Thu 9:00-18:00 (April to October) and Sun-Thu 9:00-17:00 (November to March), on Fri closes one hour before Shabbat

The oldest memento of Prague's Jewish Town and **one of the oldest Synagogues in Europe**. For over 700 years it has served as the main Synagogue of the Prague Jewish Community. It was built in the last third of the 13th century in the Cistercian-Burgundy Gothic style by stonemasons working on the nearby monastery of St Agnes and bears witness to the important role of the then Prague Jewish Community. It is also the oldest remaining twin-nave medieval Synagogue. In the 17th century the medieval part was extended with a women's side-nave, with internal windows onto the main twin-nave Gothic section with its five-ribbed vaulting. Originally called the *New* or *Great*, it became known as the *Old-New* (*Altneu*) when other Synagogues arose at the end of the 16th century. Another account of the name is a Prague Jewish legend: the foundation stones for the construction were brought from the demolished Temple in Jerusalem by angels under the condition (in Hebrew "alt-nay") that they would be returned to Jerusalem once its Temple was being rebuilt.

The Old-New Synagogue abounds with many rumours and legends. According to one such, the Synagogue was protected from the great fire by the wings of angels, transfigured as doves, and so has lasted without serious damage to the present day. Another legend insists that still under its roof are the remains of the **Golem**, an artificial being made by Rabbi Löw to protect the Prague community.

The Old-New Synagogue was the spiritual home of key rabbinical figures of the Prague Jewish Community. In the 16th century this indeed included **Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Rabbi Löw)**, or later, in the 18th century Chief Rabbi of Prague **Ezekiel Landau**.



Maisel Synagogue

📍 Maiselova 10, Prague 1 – Old Town 🏠 www.jewishmuseum.cz ♿
🏢 managed by: The Jewish Museum in Prague
🕒 daily except Sat and other Jewish holidays 9:00-16:30 (November to March) and 9:00-18:00 (April-October)

The Synagogue was built between 1590-1592 with privileges granted by Rudolf II as the private oratory of the Jewish Community Primate, Mordecai Meisel. The builder Jude Coref de Herz designed what was, for its time, an **unusual three-nave building in the Renaissance style with distinctive Gothic features** fitted out with a multitude of rare ritual objects. Over the centuries it was rebuilt several times, latterly during the Josefov redevelopment at the turn of the 19th and 20th century by the architect Alfred Grott, who added false vaulting, a built-in Gallery, new windows, and a neo-Gothic interior.

Is one of the historic Jewish buildings managed by the **Jewish Museum in Prague, founded in 1906**. During World War II it served as a repository for thousands of rare ritual objects saved from the Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia destroyed by the Nazis. Following the wholesale murder of the vast majority of the domestic Jewish population, and hence under tragic circumstances, it became **one of the most important world collections of Judaica**, which the Jewish Museum in Prague takes care of on behalf of the Czech and Moravian Jewish Community.



Spanish Synagogue

📍 Věžeňská 1, Prague 1 – Old Town 🏠 www.jewishmuseum.cz ♿
🏢 managed by: The Jewish Museum in Prague
🕒 daily except Sat and other Jewish holidays 9:00-16:30 (November to March) and 9:00-18:00 (April-October)

The most recent Synagogue of Prague's Jewish Town was built between 1867-1868 in place of an oratory known as the Old School. It was built in the **Moorish style**, designed by Ignatius Ullmann and Josef Niklas. The Neo-Renaissance building on a square groundplan has a massive dome above the central space. Its spectacular decor, designed by architects Antonín Baum and Friedrich Münzberger, **mimics the Spanish interiors of the Alhambra**.

In the spirit of religious tradition, the interior decoration is purely ornamental, the surfaces covered with low stucco arabesques and stylized geometrical and vegetal motifs inspired by Islamic architecture, with rich gilding and polychrome finishes, as echoed in the highly crafted extras. For its time, the Synagogue was technically very well equipped. It had central heating and particular care was given to good acoustics, to serve religious music and singing.

The exhibition on the **History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia in the 19-20th century** introduces the gradual emancipation of the Jews in Austro-Hungary, the emergence of the Czech-Jewish and Zionist movements, of key businessmen, scientists, writers, musicians and artists of that time. On the first floor, in the winter prayer rooms, it showcases a representative selection of more than 200 of the most valuable silver objects from the collections of the Museum under the title **Czech Synagogue Silverware**.



Today you can find showcased here the **history of the Jews in the Czech Lands (10-18th century)** with rare exhibits; on touch-screens you can scroll through old Hebrew manuscripts, inspect the plans of Jewish settlements or search the database for major Jewish historical figures.

Klausen Synagogue

📍 U Starého hřbitova 3a, Prague 1 – Old Town

🌐 www.jewishmuseum.cz

🏛️ managed by: The Jewish Museum in Prague

🕒 *daily except Sat and other Jewish holidays 9:00-16:30 (November to March) and 9:00-18:00 (April-October)*

From the 16th century, the present Klausen Synagogue was predated by three smaller buildings, called “**klausen**” – including the yeshiva the Jewish school for the study of the Talmud, which was founded by the renowned Rabbi Löw. Today’s Synagogue, in the early-Baroque style was established after the disastrous fire of the Old Town and of the ghetto in 1689. It has a single nave, with a domed vault, richly stuccoed with lunettes.

The Klausen Synagogue was the **largest Synagogue in the ghetto**, the second main Synagogue of the Prague Jewish Community. The Prague Burial Society that took care of Jewish funerals, cemeteries, the sick and the dying, held their annual meetings here.

The exhibition of Jewish traditions and customs ‘I’ shows the prime sources of Judaism, allows a look at an open scroll of the Torah, including its adornments, explains Jewish worship and other Jewish holidays and religious celebrations. It also captures the **everyday life of Jewish families**, practices related to birth, circumcision, the bar mitzvah, weddings and divorce.



Ceremonial Hall

📍 U Starého hřbitova 3b, Prague 1 – Old Town

🌐 www.jewishmuseum.cz

🏛️ managed by: The Jewish Museum in Prague

🕒 *daily except Sat and other Jewish holidays 9:00-16:30 (November to March) and 9:00-18:00 (April-October)*

In the immediate vicinity of the Klausen Synagogue, built at the beginning of the 20th century by the architect František Gerstel is a **Romanesque revival style building**. It originally served as the ceremonial hall and morgue of the **Prague Burial Society** (*Hevra kadishah*), an important religious and social institution of the ghetto founded in 1564 by Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi. On the first floor was a room for the ritual cleansing of the dead, on the second floor, a community room.

Here you can see the **exhibition of Jewish traditions and customs ‘II’ dedicated to the history and activities of the Prague Burial Society** and a fifteen-part image set from the 1870s, depicting in detail the customs and ceremonies connected with death and burial, as well as related silver ritual objects. Also of interest are **fragments of the oldest gravestones in Prague from the 14th century**, memorial prayers for the deceased and a map of the extant Jewish cemeteries in the Czech Lands.



Pinkas Synagogue

📍 Široká 3, Prague 1 – Old Town 📍 www.jewishmuseum.cz

🏢 managed by: The Jewish Museum in Prague

🕒 daily except Sat and other Jewish holidays 9:00-16:30 (November to March) and 9:00-18:00 (April-October)

A Late-Gothic building with elements of early Renaissance, built in the year 1535 by one of the leading and wealthiest members of the Prague Jewish Community, Aaron Meshulam Zalman Horowitz. The Synagogue served as a private family oratory, with the ritual bath (Mikveh) nearby. In the early 17th century the builder Jude de Herz added the south wing with an empora (women's gallery), the vestibule and Renaissance decor for the Torah ark.

After reconstruction in the mid-20th century, the interior was adapted as a **Memorial of Czech and Moravian victims of the Shoah**. The names of victims on the walls of the nave, the gallery and into the vestibule were painted freehand by Jiří John and Václav Bošтік. The names are arranged alphabetically by the last known place of residence. The monument carries nearly **80,000 names** and belongs among the oldest of its kind in Europe.

The turbulent times of WWII are recalled by an **exhibit of children's drawings from Terezín**, which presents the **fate of Jewish children imprisoned in Theresienstadt camp**.

Jerusalem Synagogue

📍 Jeruzalémská 7, Prague 1 – New Town 📍 www.synagogue.cz

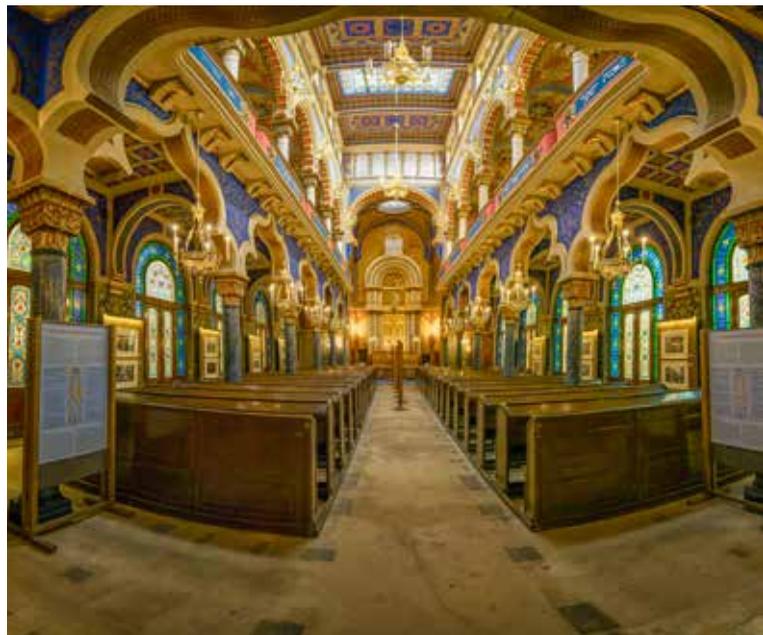
🏢 managed by: The Jewish Community of Prague

🕒 daily except Sat and other Jewish holidays 10:00-17:00 (April-October)

The Synagogue was built between 1905-1906 by the Viennese architect and Imperial construction supervisor Wilhelm Stiassny, as a replacement for three Synagogues (the Zigeiner, the Velkodyvorská, and the New) destroyed in the years 1898-1906 during the redevelopment. Although the association which took up the challenge of building the Synagogue was founded in 1896, it took ten years before the **Synagogue was inaugurated on 16 September 1906**. Initially it bore the name of the *Jubilee Temple of Emperor Franz Joseph* to commemorate the 50th anniversary of his reign, in 1898. After WWI, the present name, the Jerusalem Synagogue, based on the street name where it stands, slowly gained ground. The street name has nothing to do with the Synagogue, however: the street is named after the Church of Jerusalem former chapel of St Henry, nearby.

The Jerusalem Synagogue is distinctive in that it is **one of only eight Synagogues built to W. Stiassny's design, where services are still held**. The only hiatus was during the war years 1941-1945, when it acted as a repository of seized Jewish property.

Besides its religious role, the Synagogue is a **cultural and exhibition venue**. The concerts regularly held here let visitors listen to the **uniquely preserved original organ by Emanuel Stephen Peter**.



The Jewish Town Hall and the High Synagogue

📍 Maiselova 18, Prague 1 – Old Town 🌐 www.kehilaprag.cz

🏢 managed by: The Jewish Community of Prague

🚫 closed to the public

The Jewish Town Hall was originally built by Primate Mordecai Meisel; today it comprises a set of two historic houses, rebuilt in 1765 to their current form with a Rococo façade. In 1908 the Town Hall had an extension built on, with offices and a social and meeting hall. In the Jewish Town Hall is a clock mechanism from 1764, that drives an **unusual clock with a Hebrew dial**. Adjacent to the Town Hall is the **Renaissance-era High Synagogue**, built by the architect Pankrác Roder in 1568. Its construction was also allegedly financed by Mordecai Meisel. It has burned down several times during its existence, but its interior has lasted to the present day, which makes it **one of the most notable Renaissance features of Prague**. Especially architecturally valuable is the tabernacle, the vault of the nave and the ornamentation, with many lunettes and gilded adornments.

After World War II, the Synagogue was used as an exhibition space for the collections of the State Jewish Museum. In the 1990s the Synagogue reverted to the Prague Jewish Community, who returned the space to its former role as a place of worship and joined it through to the Jewish Town Hall building.

The High Synagogue is only used for worship and is not normally open to the public.



Cemeteries

The Old Jewish Cemetery

📍 Široká 3, Prague 1 – Old Town 🌐 www.jewishmuseum.cz

🚶 entered via the Klausen Synagogue exit

🏢 managed by: The Jewish Museum in Prague

🕒 daily except Sat and other Jewish holidays 9:00-16:30 (November to March) and 9:00-18:00 (April-October)

One of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the world, and along with the Old-New Synagogue one of the most important Jewish monuments in Prague. The cemetery was founded before the year 1440. Burials here ended in 1787, by the Decree of Joseph II prohibiting the use of burial grounds within the inhabited parts of the city.



The Old Jewish Cemetery encompasses **some 12,000 tombstones**, but there are many more graves here. Many of the tombs collapsed into the strata beneath, while others, the wooden ones, gave way to the ravages of time. Because Jewish religious custom prohibits disturbing old graves, more and more new soil was brought in to the cemetery and layers added. **The dead were thus interred in several layers, above one another**, with the characteristic crowding of adjacent gravestones from various centuries.

From the end of the 16th and in the 17th century, the initially simple tombstones begin to tell, in relief symbols, of family signs and names, of status and calling. In the Baroque, four-sided tumbras (little houses) become more frequent. Prague is the only place in Europe with so many still intact. The notables buried here include the significant thinker and Rector of the Talmud School, **Rabbi Löw** and the benefactor of the Prague ghetto and Primate of the Prague Jewish Community, **Mordecai Meisel**.

National Geographic Magazine ranks the Old Jewish Cemetery among the **ten most worthwhile cemetery sights to see in the whole world**.



The New Jewish cemetery in Žižkov

📍 [Izraelská 1, Prague 3 – Žižkov](#) 📍 [www.synagogue.cz](#) ♿

👤 **managed by: The Jewish Community of Prague**

🕒 *apart from Sat and other Jewish holidays, Sun-Thu 9:00-17:00 and Fri 9:00-14:00 (April to October) and Sun-Thu 9:00-16:00, Fri 9:00-14:00 (November to March)*

The cemetery was founded in 1890 when the Old Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov (in today's Fibichova street) ceased to be viable. Currently it is the **only Jewish cemetery in Prague still serving Jewish-faith followers**. The cemetery was laid out for some 100,000 graves and is more than 10 times larger than the Old Jewish Cemetery in the Old Town.

The cemetery features tombs of various styles: from neo-Gothic to neo-Renaissance, Prague and Vienna Secession, Classicism, Purism and Constructivism, to modern. Many of the tombstones are valued works by foremost Czech sculptors and architects, such as Jan Kotěra and Josef Fanta.

Places by the entrance to the cemetery host the honorary graves of prominent rabbis, a memorial to the ship Patria and a WWII Memorial. Along the East wall are the impressive family tombs of notable business families such as the Petscheks and the Waldeses. The Waldes tomb is decorated with two relief busts – the last work of Josef Václav Myslbek, who sculpted the statue of St Wenceslas on Wenceslas Square.

The most looked-for sites include the tomb of the writer Franz Kafka and his parents as a six-sided crystal with burial dates inscribed on the front.

An unusual feature is the cemetery having a special permit for a cremation grove, though Jewish tradition rejects cremation. It is also the last resting place of the Czech poet Jiří Orten.

The Old Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov

📍 [Fibichova 2, Prague 3 – Žižkov](#) 📍 [www.synagogue.eu](#) ♿

👤 **managed by: The Jewish Community of Prague**

🕒 *apart from Sat and other Jewish holidays, Sun-Thu 9:00-17:00 and Fri 9:00-14:00 (April to October) and Sun-Thu 9:00-16:00, Fri 9:00-14:00 (November to March)*

The history of this cemetery dates back to 1680 when it was set up as a **plague burial ground of the Prague Jewish Community**. After 1787, following the closure of the cemetery in the ghetto, this cemetery became Prague's main Jewish burial ground. For feasibility reasons, burials here ended in 1890, funerals moved to the New Jewish Cemetery.

The most visited tomb here is the **last resting place of Prague's Chief Rabbi Ezekiel Landau**, also known under the name Noda bi-Yehuda (1713-1793). Also laid to rest here are other prominent Jewish figures, including representatives of the Enlightenment and modern Jewish intelligence, e.g. Landau's pupil, a member of the Rabbinical College, Eleazar Fleckeles (1754-1826) or the historian David Podiebrad (1803-1882).

During WWII, this cemetery was the only place in Prague the Jewish population could use as a park. At the end of the 1950s, most of the cemetery, including the graves and tombs, was buried under landfill and an civic park established, today's Mahlerovy sady.

Between 1985 and 1992, part of the Mahler park gave way to the television transmitter tower – the remains of the dead under the construction site were dug up and reburied at the New Jewish Cemetery. In the untouched parts of the current park, the **rest of the graves lie still covered up**.



Renowned Jewish figures



Mechanical heart of Franz Kafka by artist David Černý

Rabbi Löw

b. cca 1512-1526 – most likely in Poznań, Poland

d. 1609 – Prague (buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague – Josefov)

Judah Loew ben Bezalel was **one of Europe's most important Jewish thinkers and rabbis**. He was also known under the name MaHaRaL, which is the Hebrew acronym Morenu Ha-Rav Leva (our teacher Rabbi Leva). Although he only spent a part of his life in Prague, in Jewish literature he is always the 'MaHaRaL mi-Prag', the MaHaRaL of Prague.

Rabbi Löw was probably born in Poznań, but by the year 1553 had become the Chief Rabbi of Moravia. In 1573 he moved to Prague, where he was active, with some interruptions, until his death. In 1592, he met with the Emperor Rudolf II, but no specific record of their meeting has survived.

Rabbi Löw is known in the Jewish tradition **particularly for his religious writings**, which continue to apply and are still being published, in Hebrew, and in translation. His landmark works include two books of annotations, the *Pirkei Avot – Derech Chaim* (Sayings of the Fathers) and *Netivot Olam* (the Path of the Torah). In these writings are many philosophical reflections on Judaism, as well as on human ethics and morality. He also wrote the *Gur Aryeh*, explaining Rashi's comments, with notes on the Tanach, Targum and Midrash.

The name of Rabbi Löw is inextricably linked with the **legend of the Golem of Prague**, whose remains are allegedly still in the Old-New Synagogue loft. The Rabbi's Tomb is among the most sought-out places in the Old Jewish Cemetery.





photo: © Jewish Museum in Prague

Mordecai Meisel

b. 1520 – Prague

d. 1601 – Prague (buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague – Josefov)

Mordecai ben Samuel Meisel is one of the **most important personalities of the Prague Jewish Community**. His family settled in Prague during the 15th century. As a young man, he had to temporarily leave the city in connection with the decision of Emperor Ferdinand I of Germany, who banished the Jews from Prague no less than twice during his reign.

After his return, Mordecai Meisel became a successful merchant and banker, a major patron of the Jewish Town, sat on the Jewish Council and ultimately became the community's **Primate**. History knows him chiefly for his role as the *Court Jew of Emperor Rudolf II*. Through this role he gained many benefits for the Prague Jewish Community and by special personal privilege was allowed to build a private oratory, the Meisel Synagogue.

In the Renaissance period of the 16th century, Mordecai Meisel was a **prime developer of the ghetto**. He contributed to the construction of the Jewish Town Hall, at his own expense paved the streets, and built a hospital and two Synagogues. In his memory, the central street of Josefov is called Maiselova.

In the Old Jewish Cemetery, the tomb of Mordecai Meisel stands out. It is a large 'tent-shaped' Tumba, or Ohel. His importance is borne out by the fact that when he died, in 1601, the Emperor Rudolf II personally attended his funeral.

Ezekiel Landau

b. 1713 – Opatów, Poland

d. 1793 – Prague (buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov)

Ezekiel ben Yehuda Landau was born in Opatów, Poland and studied at the yeshiva (religious school) in Volodymyr-Volynskij and Brody. From 1745 he served as Rabbi of Yampol in Ukraine, and in 1755 he became the Chief Rabbi of Prague. Here he founded a yeshiva, whose most important pupils included the future Rabbi of Vilnius and the great Jewish thinker Avraham Danzig.

Ezekiel Landau is also known under the name of his keynote work *Noda bi-Yehuda* (Famed in Judea), which was the **primary source of contemporary Jewish law**. This collection is esteemed by rabbis and scholars as peerless, for its logic, with due regard to the decisions and works of his predecessors.

Although he was a classical Talmud scholar dealing with the Kabbalah, he remained open to worldly knowledge.



photo: © Jewish Museum in Prague

Gustav Sicher

b. 1880 – Klatovy

d. 1960 – Prague (buried in the New Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov)

He studied philosophy at Prague's Charles University and the rabbinical seminary in Vienna. His first rabbinical post was at the Jewish Community in Náchod, but his main spiritual work was in Prague. During WWI, he served as field rabbi in the Austrian army, after which, in 1928 he became rabbi at Prague's Vinohrady district. This community was at that time among the largest in the country. In the early 1930s he became the **Chief Rabbi of Prague**.



photo: © Jewish Museum in Prague

After the rise of the Nazis he managed to emigrate to Palestine. He came back to his homeland only in 1947. As the highest representative of the Prague and Territorial Rabbinate he tried to revive the religious life of Jewish communities so nearly exterminated by the Nazi regime. He also contributed much to reviving and supporting tradition as a translator. As far back as 1932-1939 he had, together with Rabbi Isidor Hirsch, translated into Czech the first four of the Five Books of Moses. His translation of the last and fifth book came out in 1950.

Franz Kafka

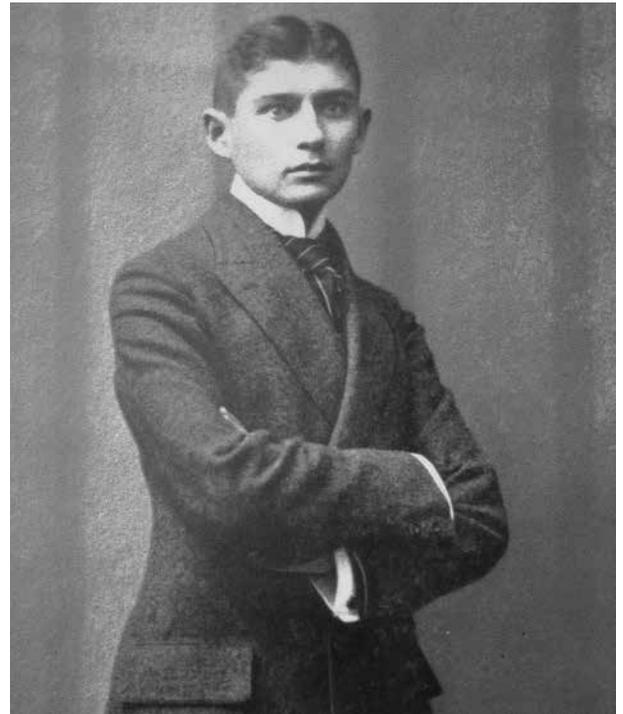
b. 1883 – Prague

d. 1924 – Kierling by Klosterneuburg (buried in the New Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov)

This **German language writer with a distinctive imagination**, who influenced a whole generation of readers, is notable among Prague natives. Franz Kafka was born as the first of six children into the family of haberdasher Herman Kafka, with whom he had an uneasy relationship. His vigour and industriousness were anathema to ever-sickly Franz. After graduating from the German humanities high school, he studied law at his father's behest working briefly at the Prague branch of Italian insurer Assicurazioni Generali. From 1908 to 1922 he worked at the Workers' Accident Insurance co., but was pensioned-off early for health reasons.

Kafka had a life-long struggle with illness, despite his fastidiousness – he was a vegetarian, non-smoker, non-drinker and avoided sugary foods. Yet he was often plagued with migraines, dizziness, stomach ulcers and other problems. In 1917, he experienced the first bloodied signs of tuberculosis, which eventually resulted in his death.

Writing was at the centre of Kafka's life, but rather than fulfilment, brought him ceaseless discontent. Brief periods of euphoria and productivity were followed by incredibly self-critical doubt about everything he wrote. Although his *evening and nocturnal scribbles* were his one desire, he published only sporadically during his life. He ordered all his writing be burned on his death, and were it not for his life-long friend Max Brod, who defied his wish, Kafka would be largely unknown today, except to literary scholars.



Three seminal works by Kafka:

The Castle – This most multi-layered of Kafka's works belongs to the very best of his writings. The bleak and hopeless journey of a surveyor, K, to work at an otherwise unspecified castle, is interwoven with absurdities, a frustrating atmosphere and an unresolved ending, leaving the reader free to muse about the meaning of the entire novel.

The Trial – “Someone must have been spreading lies about Josef K, for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one morning”. The first sentence of this equally brilliant novel gives an inkling of the author's favourite topics – one's struggle against an unfathomable machinery of power and a burdensome bureaucracy.

Metamorphosis – This remarkable story of the transformation of travelling salesman Gregor Samsa into a monstrous insect is the perfect starting point for anyone still unacquainted with Kafka. Absurd and grotesque, this misfit tale is cloaked in mystery and ambiguity to this day.



Where to follow-up Kafka in Prague:

The Franz Kafka Museum

📍 Cihelná 2b, Prague 1 – Lesser Quarter 📄 www.kafkamuseum.cz
🕒 daily 10:00-18:00

The permanent exhibition presents the majority of Kafka first editions, his correspondence, diaries, manuscripts, photographs, drawings and much more.

The Franz Kafka Society

📍 Široká 14, Prague 1 – Old Town 📄 www.franzkafka-soc.cz

A non-profit cultural revival organization, bringing back the context of Prague's German-language literature. It has its own themed bookshop and publishing house and a replica of Kafka's private library with almost a thousand period volumes.

The Franz Kafka Monument

📍 Dušní St., Prague 1 – Old Town

A one-of-a-kind 'equestrian' statue in bronze by Jaroslav Róna, based on the short story *Description of a Struggle*. Franz is shown sitting astride a headless figure – an empty suit. The monument was commissioned by the Franz Kafka Society.

The mechanical head of Franz Kafka

📍 Spálená 22, Prague 1 – New Town

This almost 11 metre high mobile installation by David Černý, the author of a number of original outdoor works of art, is made of 42 layered slices, which in programmed sequence form and deform Kafka's head.

Kafka's House

📍 náměstí Franze Kafky, Prague 1 – Old Town

Kafka was born in the corner house of Maiselova and Kaprova streets, Prague's redevelopment left only the baroque portal of the then Prelature. It's early 20th century, form is by the architect Oskar Polívka. The house bears a commemorative plaque by Jan Kaplický with a portrait relief by Karel Hladík and the text *Franz Kafka was born here on 3 July 1883*.

Franz Kafka gravestone

📍 The New Jewish cemetery, Izraelská 1, Prague 3 – Žižkov

The gravestone of the writer and his parents (no. 21-14-21) by architect Leopold Ehrmann is in the shape of a six-sided crystal. The facing wall bears a plaque to Kafka's friend, Max Brod.

Max Brod

b. 1884 – Prague

d. 1968 – Tel Aviv

This major German-language writer of Jewish origin is known today primarily as the man who 'discovered' Franz Kafka. Yet, at the time, his contribution to Czech-German cultural life was far greater. Max Brod was born into the family of a Bank director. Since childhood he suffered the consequences of a serious malady of the spine, which dogged him all his life. This may be why his works abound with smart individuals who have physical defects. His friendship with Kafka began during their studies, with a minor altercation over the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and continued without a break until Kafka's death.

Brod was, unlike Kafka, a socializer, bringing together other significant writers; what later came to be known as the **Prague circle**. Taking a wider view, we can include all the German-language

authors who lived and wrote in Prague in the early 20th century. The core comprised only a few individuals (e.g. Franz Kafka, Felix Weltsch and Oskar Baum).

He also applied his nose for talent to Czech-language authors. It was he who is credited with putting on the theatrical rendition of Jaroslav Hašek's *Good Soldier Schweik*, in Berlin.

He was also a great promoter of the composer Leoš Janáček, whose libretto he translated into German, and author of the first monograph about him.

Brod's cultural reach spans practically all disciplines – he is the author of several novels, a number of literary and musical critiques, translations, philosophical writings, essays, and 38 musical compositions.



On the eve of the occupation in 1939 he managed to leave Prague with his wife Elsa by the last departing train, to settle in Tel Aviv.

Hans Krása

b. 1899 – Prague

d. 1944 – Auschwitz

This talented composer made his name particularly through his children's opera *Brundibár*, which we find still in the repertoire of e.g. the Prague Children's Opera. Krása's feel for composition manifested itself at an early age; aged 11, one of his orchestral works premiered performed by the Spa Orchestra in Salzburg.

The turning point came in 1921, when he received wider recognition thanks to the orchestral songs *Vier Orchesterlieder op. 1*, which drew on the themes of Christian Morgenstern's poems from the collection *Gallows songs*. The highlight of Krása's works, before deportation to Terezín, was the opera *Betrothal in a Dream*, for which he **won the 1933 Czechoslovak State Prize**. At this time, he also began cooperation with the Czech writer and artist Adolf Hoffmeister – Krása composed the music for the drama *Youth at Play*, and his *Anna's Song* was a tune hummed by many a Prague resident.

In 1942 during the Nazi occupation, Krása was deported to the Terezín camp, where he greatly promoted cultural life. With the children there, in arduous conditions, he **staged the cheerful opera *Brundibár***, which ran to over 50 performances. The show paradoxically appeared even in Nazi propaganda footage, *The Führer gives the Jews a City*, which very tendentiously portrayed the conditions in Theresienstadt, making it out to be some sort of Jewish spa town. Krása's artistically fruitful life was extinguished in 1944 in Auschwitz.



Otto Ungar: Portrét Hanse Krásy; Památník Terezín, PT 16,
© Pavel Weisz, Tomáš Weisz, Eva Odstrčilová

Food and Jewish cuisine



Jewish cuisine is founded on the so-called *Kashrut*, ritual dietary practices. This stems from the Hebrew word *kashér* – suitable, which describes everything permissible or fitting. The basic rules of *Kashrut* specify what is allowed and what is prohibited. In particular, the preparation of meat, so as to avoid consuming blood. Equally important is the separation of meat from dairy products.

Considered ritually clean are all animals with cloven hooves that chew the cud, i.e. herbivores. Additionally, fish with scales and fins. As for birds, any that the Torah does not specifically prohibit. Among the prohibited species are all carnivorous predators, scavengers, single-hooved mammals, seafood and hogs. **Each animal must be slaughtered by way of a ritual – the *shechita*.** Never considered kosher are animals that were shot dead or had died of natural causes.

Classic Jewish dishes include the **gefi te fisch** – chopped deboned fishmeat (typically carp) made into flattened cakes, slowly poached in broth, served chilled. Another traditional Jewish meal is **cholent** (or hamin). This classic Shabbat dish consists of stew that is prepared on Friday and allowed to cook slowly overnight until Saturday. Basic cholent contains meat, potatoes, pearl barley and beans. Traditional sundries are **kishkeh** (sausage casings stuffed with a mixture of flour and onion), **kneidlach** (dumplings) or **kugel** (pudding).



A family at the table (grace after a meal): an illustration from *Seder zmirot u-virkat ha-mazon*, Prague, 1514; photo: © Jewish Museum in Prague

Restaurants

King Solomon Restaurant

📍 Široká 8, Prague 1 – Old Town 🌐 www.kosher.cz

🕒 Mon-Thu, noon-22:30, Fri (dinner) and Sat (lunch) only by reservation

Glatt kosher restaurant, one of the oldest kosher restaurants in the country. Original recipes from Central and Eastern Europe are prepared from local products under rabbinical supervision. You can

choose from traditional dishes, including *gefilte fisch* (carp pâté), *chopped herring*, *roast lamb with garlic*, *golden chicken broth with matzo dumplings*, and many other classic and popular dishes.

Dinitz

📍 **Bílková 12, Prague 1 – Old Town** 📍 www.dinitz.cz

🕒 *Mon-Thu 11:30-22:00, Fri 11:30-16:30, Sat 18:30-22:30 and Sun 11:30-22:00*

Dinitz restaurant is a long-standing standard-setter on the Prague kosher scene. It is the meeting place for local Jewish community members as well as non-Jewish visitors who want to taste Israeli cuisine. On the menu are juicy steaks, fresh salads and excellent



hummus. Particularly popular is the Shabbat menu on Friday night (4 courses with unlimited drinks) or Saturday lunch, featuring cholent – a dish from North Africa.

Chabad Grill Restaurant

📍 **U Milosrdných 6, Prague 1 – Old Town** 📍 www.chabadgrill.cz

🕒 *Sun-Thu 12:30 – 22:30 and Fri 10:00-15:00*

Glatt kosher dining quality and standards in the restaurant are approved and continuously rabbinically supervised by the international organization Chabad. The cuisine here, with its distinct Mediterranean slant, is known for its healthy and tasty dishes. All the suppliers of food products are Kosher-certified producers. No matter whether it is meat from Vienna or Berlin, wine from Israel or Italy, or parve ice cream from Israel.

Shelanu Dairy Restaurant

📍 **Břehová 8, Prague 1 – Old Town** 📍 www.shelanu.cz

🕒 *Sun-Thu 9:00-22:00 and Fri 9:00-16:00*

This Kosher milk and vegetarian restaurant serves various kinds of pizzas, panini, sandwiches, fish, and excellent falafel. Meals can be ordered for delivery direct to your hotel.

Letenské sady

- 1 Old-New Synagogue
- 2 Maisel Synagogue
- 3 Spanish Synagogue
- 4 Klausen Synagogue
- 5 Ceremonial Hall
- 6 Pinkas Synagogue
- 7 Jewish Town Hall and High Synagogue
- 8 Old Jewish Cemetery



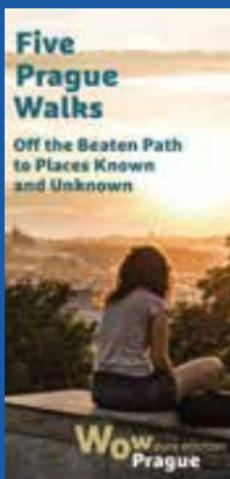
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Old Town Hall,

📍 Old Town Square No. 1, Prague 1
🕒 daily 9 a.m. – 7 p.m.

Na Můstku,

📍 Rytířská No. 12, Prague 1
🕒 daily 9 a.m. – 7 p.m.

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