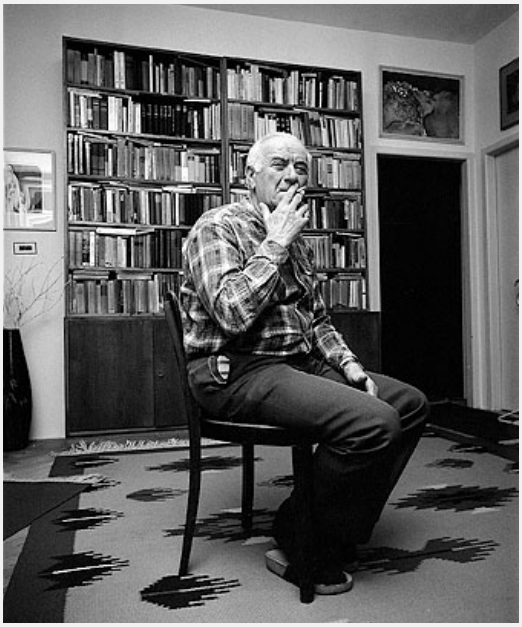
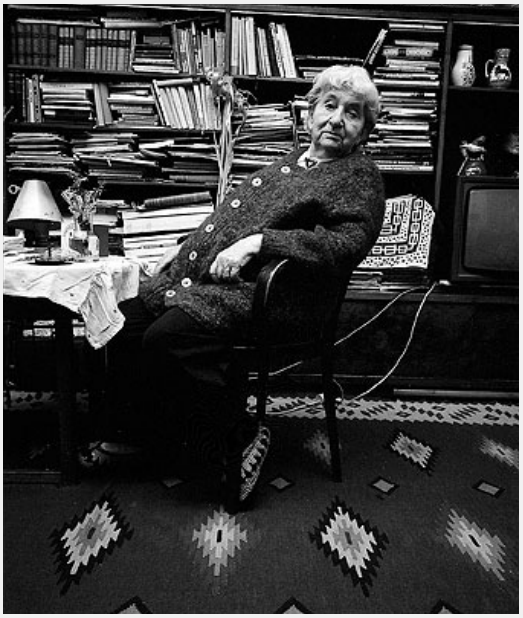
Czech Republic & Slovakia

I made my first visit to Prague in 1984. The city was as magical as it was melancholy. I began photographing in Czechoslovakia in 1988 and continued until 2000. In a separate section of my archive there's a folder on 1989, and I was in Prague for at least part of what they called The Velvet Revolution in November and December, 1989. In April, 1990, I was very lucky to have been asked by Michael Zantovsky, President Havel's press secretary, to join them on the president's plane when he made his official visit to Israel.

Czech Jewry had always been highly assimilated and that is reflected in the pictures in my archive. Slovak Jewry, as I mention below, was always more traditional. There are less than 3,000 Jews in the Czech Republic and about the same in Slovakia.





Juri Spitzer, former president of the Writer's Union and a wartime Jewish partisan, and Irene Bluhova, a Bauhaus photographer. Both were photographed in their Bratislava apartments in January 1990.

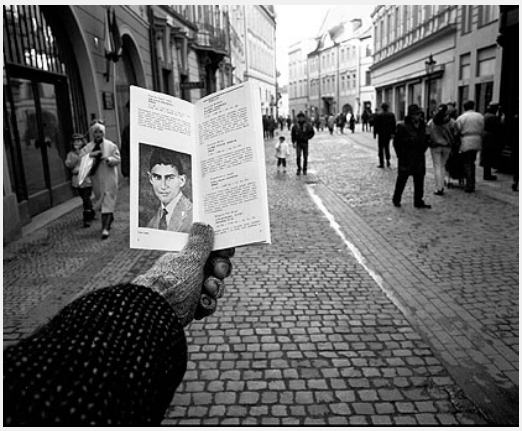
Below is an essay I wrote in the 1990s and updated it in 2017.

Prague: a Sunday morning in March 1989. Walking through this baroque jewel of a city I cross some invisible line and enter a quarter unlike the others. A man in an overcoat is unlocking the gate of a Jewish cemetery crowded with so many tombstones it looks like a sculpture garden. Synagogues — one is ancient gothic, another genuinely baroque, a third is neo-gothic from the 19th century — loom over cobbled lanes. On a baroque pink building decorated with six pointed stars, a clock tower has a face of Hebrew letters and I notice the hands are moving counter-clockwise. Two men are coming from morning prayers and stroll down a boulevard lined with elegant, late 19th century apartment houses, several with Jewish symbols on their facades. This is the Jewish quarter of Prague, the very heart of the city in the heart of Central Europe.

At the Slavia Café I breakfast with Jiri Vrba, a retired theater and television director then in his late 60s. Born in the old Jewish quarter Vrba recalls the Prague he grew up in. "Keep in mind this wasn't a city for the Hasidim, no overgrown shtetl," he cautioned smiling. "This was as rich and western a city as Vienna or Amsterdam and Jews had been emancipated for more than a century. None of my friends knew Yiddish. My family certainly didn't. Compared to other places in Europe, there was very little antisemitism. There was, relatively speaking, a history of acceptance for Jews."

As the café filled with long haired students in jeans and elderly women in heavy coats, waiters came and went with trays laden with breakfast. Vrba went on. "Between the wars, we Czechs were producing avant garde theater and photography, cinema and painting. Even now there's plenty of Functionalist architecture around—that's our Czech answer to Bauhaus — and Jews were

Jiri Vrba, center, in the Bratislava synagogue, March 1989



Kafka back in Prague. During the Communist decades, almost nothing of Kakfa was published in his hometown. I am holding a publishing company's catalogue in November, 1988, showing that a collection of his short stories was about to be published.

involved in all of this. Kafka came from mileau. So did his biographer Max Brod, journalists like Egon Irwin Kish, who was my uncle."

I mentioned what Milan Kundera wrote about Central Europe and its Jews; that they were "its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit." Vrba smiled. "We were — before the War, that is. Then there were over 300,000 Jews in Czechoslovakia, and we were as different from each other as you could possibly imagine."

Before the end of the First World War, Bohemia and Moravia, or Czech lands, had little in common with Slovakia except a similar language and was part of the same vast Austro-Hungarian Empire. Yet while Bohemia was as western in its orientation as Austria or Holland, for a thousand years Slovakia had been hogtied to Hungary and at times, brutally suppressed by Budapest. Here the Jewish population was more conservative and closer to its roots. Bratislava, Slovakia's capital (Poszony to Hungarians and Pressburg to Austrians), had become a nucleus for religious Jewish learning and by the 19th century was the very center of Hungarian Orthodox Judaism.

"Yes, well, it's true most Slovak Jews lived in a traditional setting," said Dr Berta Vodickova in 1985, "by the 1930s, much of it was for appearances. For instance, girls were already going to high school and university, myself included, and were excelling in fields you wouldn't have thought possible. Two photographers, Magda Robinson and Irena Bluh, went on to become very well known. My own family wasn't very religious, but since we lived in a village, Kuty, we kept up the pretense. And I remember in every Jewish home I visited there was a picture of President Masaryk on their walls, not necessarily some famous hasidic rabbi. Back then, we had great hopes for the republic."

Hopes that were dashed when England and France buckled to Hitler's pressure at the Munich Conference in 1938, compelling Czechoslovakia to cede the ethnically German Sudeten region to the Third Reich signaling her death.

After Munich, this last safe haven in Central Europe became a sinking ship for Jews. Although many tried to flee, few escape routes were open; in reality, almost none. Austria was already part of the Reich and those who found refuge in Hungary were to be swept up in that net six years later. One who escaped was Dr Vodickova. "My parents had me put me on a transport for young people to England and arranged to leave just after me. That was on March 14th. The Germans invaded the next day and I never saw her again." People sensed what lay in store. George F Kennan, then at the American Embassy in the capital, reported a wave of Jewish suicides.

The 315,000 Jews in Nazi-occupied Czech lands and Slovakia, the latter turned into an "independent" Nazi puppet, traveled divergent paths on different schedules during the war, but mostly to the same effect: annihilation. In Czech lands Jews were sent primarily to Theresienstadt, an internment camp with a rotating population of around 55,000 cruelly shoved into a barracks town built for 4,500. There families were separated and it was usually the elderly

who died first; alone, frightened, starving. All told, 33,000 perished in Theresienstadt, but it was never a death camp per se, only Hell's antechamber. Said Jiri Vrba, "trains were coming all the time to take us to Poland for 'resettlement,' and I remember young boys from my barracks volunteering to go ahead of their parents so they could help make things easier when they arrived. The trains, of course, were headed straight for the gas chambers."

Slovak Jews, on the other hand, survived for months, even years, in work camps, but all told over 70,000 were shipped to their deaths. Unlike in Nazi-occupied Czech lands, their deportation orders were signed by fellow Slovaks.

At war's end, less than 50,000 Czechoslovak Jews returned to their towns and villages. Not all were welcomed. In the years that followed, between antisemitic riots in Slovakia, the communists' nationalizing of private businesses, the refusal of the government to restore Jewish property, 35,000 Jews fled before 1950. Dr Vodickova, who had been on the first western medical team into Theresienstadt, said, "By this time, many Jews, myself included, felt that socialism was the only answer for this country. The only problem was, what we got wasn't very socialist."

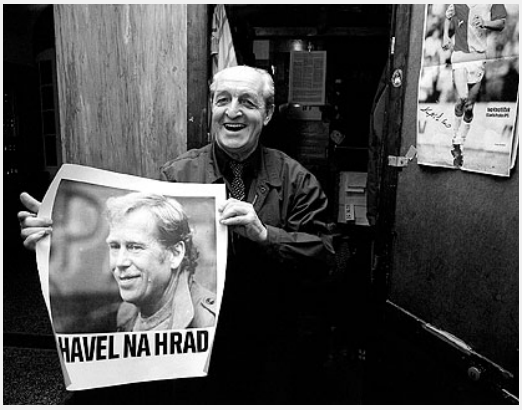
By 1948, a wall of Stalinism fell over Czechoslovakia and soon after the communist leadership turned thoroughly antisemitic. In a Stalinist show trial in 1952, of eleven defendants condemned to death, eight were Jews and the emphasis during this infamous Slansky Trial was on the defendants' Zionist activities (which had been zero) and their cosmopolitan, meaning Jewish backgrounds. The trial, which had been elaborately scripted, was broadcast over radio, further whipping up antisemitic feelings. Vrba said, "My cousin Otto Sling was one of those tried and executed. I lost my job for this and it took almost four years to get another."

Andrea, Ernej and Marta Endrjei during the Velvet Revolution, Prague, November 1989.

In the meantime Jews found regular synagogue attendance meant trouble getting into university and hindered job advancement. The official Jewish organization was staffed by apparatchiks and its newspaper turned into a party mouthpiece. The government allowed a "religious" community to exist, but Prague had no rabbi for twenty years. "You have to understand," said Andrej Ernjei, a piano tuner and jazz musician, "most Jews just didn't want to be associated with the official community. The people there weren't a very attractive group. And they became worse after '68."

Dezidir Galski, head of the Jewish community before 1985 and after 1989, on the left, with Israel's ambassador to Poland, Mordechai Palzur. Prague, January 1990.

The Soviet invasion in August of that year put an end to the brief reforms of the Prague Spring as another 6,000 Jews fled the country along with tens of thousands of others. A Brezhnev-approved regime of neo-Stalinists under Gustav Husak took control and for the next twenty one years, Czechs and Slovaks turned inward, away from the dullards running their country as those who had stood up for reform or refused to commend the Soviet invasion were fired. Vrba found himself shipped off to an industrial town in the north to work. Dr Vodickova was demoted. Others were fired outright and many intellectuals were forced into manual labor. The Jewish community only mirrored these conditions. While the government poured forth a never ending stream of ideology, Jews watched their own



On the streets of Prague, November, 1989, and in the Prague Jewish community center that same week. January 1990.

Klimova pictured during the Velvet Revolution in November, 1989

"leaders" regularly condemn Israel, demand Western powers accept world peace while they wrote enthusiastic letters of support to Rude Pravo, the Communist daily, approving the use of violence against protesters.

"Even the worst of our community leaders didn't have much of a choice in how they acted. When Dr Galski, a really good man who headed the community, didn't behave the way they wanted, he was replaced in '85," said Ernyei. "But what we did have was a Jewish choir that became the nucleus of our new community. When the Velvet Revolution came in November of 1989, it was choir members, then joined by Jews from all over, who demanded a meeting be held. That's when we asked — if you will — these old leaders to resign. And we asked Dr Galski back."

When Czechoslovaks turned their calendars to November 1989, they were living in a one party state. When they began the new year eight weeks later, they were living in a democracy. For the first time in fifty years, they were free. But that also meant for many who had lived through so much, it was too late. During the Velvet Revolution itself, I would spend my evenings in the cancer ward of a Prague hospital, holding Dr Vodickova's hand, telling her about things she would never live to see. Jiri Vrba, in the months afterwards, began working for a Czech arts agency, throwing himself with relish into his work. "I'm nearly 70. As great as this is, it has come too late," he said. "No one's hiring people my age. Not at this time, even though I can still direct, still write scripts."

For other Jews, inside and outside the community, the timing seemed almost perfect. Leo Pavlat, a long time dissident writer became a diplomat in the Czechoslovak embassy in Israel while Michael Zantovsky went to work as press secretary to President Havel. Rita Klimova went to Washington as ambassador while Lubos Dubovsky, one of the original signers of Charter 77 (a dissident document calling for human rights), quickly rose to Minister of Defense.

Vaclav Havel, the dissident playwright who had spent more than five years in prison, became the country's president at the end of December, 1989. In his first few months as president, Havel invited the president of Germany to Prague, then flew to Washington, DC, and for his next official visit, he flew to Israel where he gave a speech at Hebrew University comparing his own past to that of Kafka's. He had toiled over the speech for days, and Havel thought Israelis would find his story harrowing and compelling.

Zantovsky in President Havel's plane on its way to Israel.

A little slivovitz after Saturday morning synagogue services in Kosice, Slovakia, May, 1999

Katerina Loeffler, right, at a lecture in the Bratislava Jewish community in May, 1999

Instead, it came off in a Woody Allen, self-deprecating way and they laughed all the way through it, adoring every word he said. I took the picture above just while he was giving that speech.

In the years that followed, Klimova made quite a splash in Washington, DC as a straight talking diplomat, but she fell ill and died all too soon. Leo Pavlat returned from his post abroad and became director of the Prague Jewish Museum, a post he held for more than twenty years. Michael Zantovsky became ambassador to Israel, then the US, then the UK, before retiring and writing a much praised biography on Vaclav Havel.

In Slovakia, with its largest chapters in Bratislava and Kosice (approximately 1,000 and 500 respectively), Jewish community life carried on outside of the spotlight the world had shone on Prague, and this Jewish community, as small as it was, boasted a remarkable array of intellectuals, from heads of university departments in mathematics and philosophy to chief surgeons in hospitals.

In the 1990s, with support from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, the Prague and Bratislava Jewish communities both opened Jewish old age homes, and in Prague, Ronald Lauder's foundation underwrote the opening of a Jewish school in Prague. The Bratislava community launched a lively cultural program, where Katerina Loeffler, who Centropa would interview, showed up for every event until she passed away in 2007 at the age of 95.

The story behind the Jewish school was telling. Before 1938 it had been a Jewish school but its charges were sent to Theresienstadt where most of them were sent on to Auschwitz to be murdered. After the war, the building on Uruguay Ulica became an orphanage again while homes for the children were found around the world. By 1952 the last child was placed and the building was turned over to the city of Prague. After 1989, Mayor Jaroslav Koran gave the building back to the Jewish community and in 1997 the first Jewish students started attending classes there, where I took the picture on the left in 1999.

Czechoslovakia's newfound freedom also meant the freedom for banned authors to publish again, and one of them was Ivan Klima. Klima was one of the 150 children to be found alive in the Theresienstadt ghetto in May, 1945. Afterwards he became a Communist, lost his faith, then made trouble for himself criticizing the regime with his novels and plays. Klima left for America in 1969. But being away from his country, no matter what its rotten politics were, proved an even greater hardship and he came back in the early '70s to face more harassment.

At the end of "My Country," a short story he wrote after his return but was not published in his own language until the mid-1990s, Klima explained the inexplicable; the Jewish experience in Czechoslovakia, perhaps in all of Central Europe. The last sentence reads, "I could fly away, choose any of the four points of the compass, but I remained where I was, I stopped above this small, painful, blessed piece of earth."