

Reminders

of Jewish Settlement
in the Vysočina Region

Reminders of Jewish Settlement in Vysočina

Jews came to Vysočina beginning in the early middle ages, to settle in significant market places, at the crossroads of long-distance trade routes, and in the vicinity of noble settlements. They were directly subject to the ruler and had to pay significant amounts for permission to settle in a locale. For centuries, as a group, they were pushed to the very margins of the social hierarchy. The general hostility toward them flowed not only from Christian beliefs, but primarily from the indebtedness of the locals to their Jewish creditors. In early medieval times, Jews were prohibited from owning land and engaging in trades, and were left with only one means of support – trading and money-lending. Until the Hussite Wars, Jews lived relatively peacefully – although many times they sustained financial loss due to the cancellation of all bonds, the feared pogroms did not materialise. After 1451, however, they were banished from all royal towns, under various pretexts. They moved to neighbouring townships and villages, in which they laid the foundation of Jewish communities. Only in the second half of the 18th century were they granted the right of residency (for a fee), or allowed to study in schools and undertake trades. 1849 brought complete equality for Jews, comprehensively altering their social and economic life – they were allowed to move freely, sell real property, engage in any trade, and vote. These changes led to Jews moving from the villages back to the towns, contributing significantly to the development of trade and industry in their new homes. The favourable development of Jewish religious communities was violently interrupted by the Nazi occupation. The greatest pogrom of all time is of course known to history as the Holocaust.

In Vysočina, we encounter reminders of Jewish settlement – individual houses or entire neighbourhoods and synagogues – in many places. Many towns pay great attention to their renovation, and although synagogues no longer serve their original function, they are open to the public as exhibition or concert halls; however, due to the insensitive approach of the past decades, in many places, Jewish cemeteries stand as the only reminders of Jewish settlements.





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1 Třebíč

One of the oldest and most significant centres of Jewish settlement is in **Třebíč**. (www.kvitztrebic.cz, www.trebic.cz/unesco). A uniquely preserved Jewish quarter – in size, the largest complex of preserved Jewish sights in the Czech Republic – was included on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List in 2003. The first Jews in this area were documented in 1338 and in 1410. In the 18th century, the Jewish quarter had a purely urban character; later, two synagogues were built, as well as rabbi's quarters, a school, hospital, and an extensive cemetery outside of town. Today, the former Jewish quarter comprises 123 houses; only five houses from the original Jewish ghetto have been torn down. The town pays an extraordinary amount of attention to the regeneration of the Jewish quarter, which was declared a heritage zone in 1990. Since then, two synagogues have been renovated, and the entire quarter is being brought back to life with small shops, coffee shops, and authentic restaurants. Třebíč managed to save and rejuvenate, as an extraordinarily valuable whole, a rarely preserved medieval ghetto, gradually restoring the ancient genius loci left here by the numerous generations of Jews. The **Back Synagogue** was built in



1669, and rebuilt in the Baroque style in 1705 - 7. The interior is decorated with stucco and painted ornamental and floral motifs and images, from Hebrew liturgical texts. The synagogue houses an extensive exhibition of the history of the Jewish town. The exhibits document the everyday lives of the local inhabitants, as well as their religious customs and ceremonies. A 1:100 model of the Jewish ghetto depicts its form in 1850. The **Front Synagogue** was built from 1639 – 1642. Two hundred years later, it was adapted to its present Neo-Gothic form; since 1954, it has been used for services by the Czechoslovak Hussite Church. The **Jewish Cemetery** was established on a hillside over the Týnský Brook in the 1620s. Tradition has it that its nearly 12,000 sq metres house over three thousand tombstones. Most of them are richly decorated with reliefs, with the oldest one dating back to 1631. The grounds boast a wrought-metal entry gate, and memorials to the victims of both world wars, built in 1957.



An instructive trail leads through the Jewish Quarter, and guided walks are available.

The Information and Tourist Centre in the Back Synagogue is on Subakova 1/44, 674 01 Třebíč, tel.: +420 568 823 005, +420 568 610 023, e-mail: infosynagoga@kviztrebic.cz, www.kviztrebic.cz.



www.kviztrebic.cz
www.trebic.cz/unesco

Jemnice 2

The Jewish quarter in the town of **Jemnice** (www.tic.jemnice.cz) is also one of the oldest in the Czech lands. The first recorded reference to it dates to 1336. Twenty-three houses have been preserved, from the original Jewish quarter adjoining the southern side of the square. The Jewish cemetery was established in the 1350s; the oldest of its 400 tombstones come from the 17th century. The cemetery was severely damaged during WWII; some of the tombstones were even used as paving stones. In 1991 - 94, the cemetery was renovated to its present state.

www.tic.jemnice.cz

3 Police

Another municipality whose history was in part shaped by the Jews is the nearby town of **Police** (www.obec-police.cz). The first Jewish families moved here in 1454, when they had to leave the city of Znojmo. But, even here, the increasing number of Jews encountered hostility among the locals, and, in 1726, Jewish families were forced to re-settle in low-lying houses along a newly-built street. Its thirty houses constitute a precious urban set. At the lower end of the street stands a synagogue, built in the style of rural Baroque, now used for another purpose following renovation. At the southern edge of the town, a 17th-century Jewish cemetery has survived, with Baroque and Classicist tombstones, some with very interesting symbolism.

www.obec-police.cz

4 Moravské Budějovice

In **Moravské Budějovice** (<http://mbudejovice.cz>), the medieval Jewish quarter, with a synagogue and cemetery, ceased to exist after the Jews were banished from the town in 1564; new Jewish settlements were noted in the mid-1800s. The Art Nouveau synagogue was used as a warehouse after WWII, and torn down in 1977. A reminder of the Jewish community is the cemetery, established in 1908. A simple ceremonial hall and the house of the sexton have been preserved.

<http://mbudejovice.cz>

5 Jihlava

In **Jihlava** (www.jihlava.cz), it can be presumed that the first Jewish inhabitants arrived shortly after the town was built, in the mid-1200s. The medieval Jewish quarter, with a synagogue and cemetery, ceased to exist after the Jews were banished from the city in 1426. Jewish families left for nearby villages and towns. The new Jewish community appeared in the city from the mid-1800s, and was briefly renewed again after WWII. The synagogue, burned down in March 1939, is commemorated by a plaque on the town wall, donated to the city in 1992 by a woman born in Jihlava, who now lives in Israel. The historical houses of the Jewish quarter were insensitively torn down in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The only surviving reminder of the Jewish settlement is the Jewish cemetery, with a thousand tombstones from its new era, a ceremonial hall, and a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

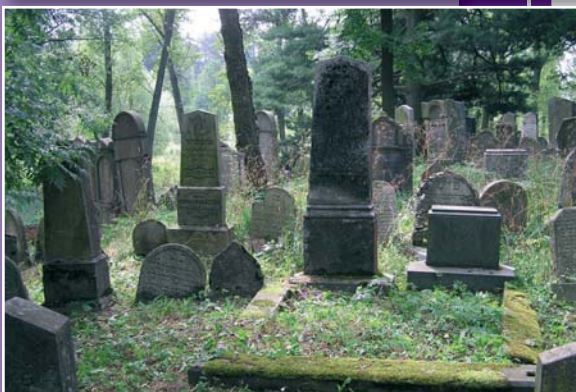
www.jihlava.cz

Polná 6

A Jewish quarter has been preserved in **Polná** (www.mesto-polna.cz). Jews lived here as early as in the 15th century, but a neighbourhood could not be built until the second half of the 17th century: the ghetto with a synagogue was established in 1681 – 1685. It comprises two parts – the original town, built in a triangle, and the lower square, the so-called Rabbi's Square, with 32 two-storey houses rebuilt in a new style, a synagogue, and the Rabbi's quarters. The synagogue is the home of the Regional Jewish Museum. Through photographs and documents, it commemorates the rich history of the local Jewish community. One of the exhibitions describes the Hilsneriad – the persecution of Jews in the late 19th century, based on the contrived accusation against a Jewish youngster, Leopold Hilsner, of the ritual murder of a local girl. The museum is open from May to September; at other times, visits can be arranged at the Tourist Information Centre. The Jewish cemetery has been expanded several times since the 16th century, and repaired continuously. It boasts remarkable Baroque, Classicist, as well as modern, tombstones.

Tourist Information Centre, Husovo náměstí 39, 588 13 Polná,
tel.: +420 567 212 556, e-mail: infocentrum@mu-polna.cz.

www.mesto-polna.cz



8 Brtnice

The oldest part of the Jewish quarter in **Brtnice** (www.brtnice.cz), with its ancient synagogue dating from 1629, school, and town hall, was torn down in 1987 – 1988. Originally, it comprised 45 houses. A new Jewish cemetery was established in 1860, next to the old, 17th century Jewish cemetery, northeast of town. A tall wall separates it from its surroundings. The spacing and decoration of the tombstones are in 17th -18th century styles. Of the simple ceremonial hall, built at the time of the cemetery's establishment, only a renovated front wall remains.

www.brtnice.cz



7 Batelov

The Jewish quarter in **Batelov**, noted from the mid-1400s, comprised 18 houses on the northeast edge of town. In 1995, a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust was installed here. The synagogue, from the late 18th century, has been used for a new purpose since its 1985 adaptation. A Jewish cemetery stretches along the top of a small hill above the town.

9 Puklice

The Jews banished from Jihlava in the 15th century also found refuge in **Puklice**. The Jewish quarter then comprised 14 houses and 4 meat shops. The small synagogue, or, rather, a prayer room, was located on the first floor of a Baroque house in the 18th century. After WWII, it was rebuilt into a residential house. On the basis of the preserved documentation, the interior of the prayer room was recreated in the Vysočina Museum in Jihlava in 1998, as a separate exhibition. A Jewish cemetery, with approximately a hundred tombstones, is located on the hillside above the village.



11 Třešť

The oldest reference to Jewish inhabitants in **Třešť** (www.trest.cz) comes from the second half of the 16th century. Around 1800, the town was the home of a famous religious school – yeshiva. The Jewish quarter sprawls across the northwest part of town, and comprises 76 houses. The empire-style synagogue built in 1693 is the only synagogue in the country with an arched entrance-way. The vaulting inside is richly decorated with stucco. After WWII, the synagogue was converted into a house of prayer of the Hussite Church, and since the 1993–1996 renovation it has served as a concert and exhibition hall. Guided tours are provided by the Tourist Information Centre. It houses an exhibition on the history of the Jewish community in Třešť and on Franz Kafka. The author came to Třešť to visit his uncle, and this environment inspired him to write the story “A Country Doctor”. The close proximity of the Catholic church stands as evidence of the religious tolerance of the local inhabitants. The Jewish cemetery, surrounded by a stone wall, contains precious Baroque and Classicist tombstones with symbolic decorations. The oldest tombstone bears the date 1705. The cemetery ceased to be used for burials in WWII, when all of the Jewish inhabitants were deported to concentration camps. Their fate is commemorated by the memorial erected in 1992 in the courtyard of the Town Hall.

Tourist Information Centre, Rooseveltova 462,
589 01 Třešť, tel.: +420 567 234 567, e-mail: info@trest.cz

www.trest.cz

10 Telč

In **Telč** (www.telc-etc.cz, www.telc.eu), five houses in the southwest part of the historical town-centre have survived from the original Jewish settlement. The synagogue was built adjoining the town wall, in the Neo-Romanesque style. After WWII, it was converted, and today it is used for a different purpose. Local victims of Nazi racial persecution are commemorated by ceramic plates bearing their names, located in the antechamber of the parish church of St. James. In the 17th century, the town administrator permitted a Jewish cemetery to be built some 7 kilometres outside of town. The new cemetery was established in 1879 much closer; its ceremonial hall serves as a gallery today.

www.telc-etc.cz, www.telc.eu

Velké Meziříčí 12

The first Jews probably arrived in **Velké Meziříčí** (www.mestovm.cz) in the 15th century, and the settlement developed more extensively after the Thirty Years' War. In the 18th century, Jews accounted for one-third of the population, and important rabbis worked in the local yeshiva. The Jewish quarter stretches along the shore of the River Oslava. Sixty-three of the original 101 houses have been preserved, many of them with Renaissance and Baroque layouts, with interior passages and impressive architectural details. A precious classicist portal has been preserved in the former Old Synagogue, dating from the early 16th century. It has been renovated for exhibition purposes; in the women's gallery, the Magen David museum exhibition, recounting the history of the local Jews, welcomes visitors

**Galerie Synagoga, Novosady 79,
594 01 Velké Meziříčí, tel.: +420 566 524 621,
e-mail: muzeumvm@muzeumvm.cz.**

The New Synagogue was completed in 1870 in the Neo-Gothic style. It owes its distinctive appearance to its brick façade; two Hebrew inscriptions can be found on the front. It is presently used for another purpose. A third, allegedly the oldest synagogue, stood between the two until it was torn down in the 1960s. The Jewish cemetery on the hillside above the river was established in 1650. The oldest legible tombstone dates from 1677; a Neo-Romanesque ceremonial hall stands by the entrance. Visits to the cemetery can be arranged at the museum.

www.mestovm.cz





13 Golčův Jeníkov

The synagogue in **Golčův Jeníkov** (www.golcuv-jenikov.cz) has also been renovated. Built in the Neo-Romanesque style in 1871–1873, it was embellished with Moorish decorative elements. Above the main gable on the façade are Moses' Ten Commandments rendered in gold letters, and below, a large ornamental Star of David. The synagogue houses the depository of the Jewish Museum in Prague and is not open to the public. The local Talmud school was the last of its kind in Bohemia; until 1881, it was attended by Czech as well as foreign students. About a kilometre outside of the town is a Jewish cemetery. The oldest tombstones date from the 16th century, bearing, aside from Hebrew texts, inscriptions in Czech and German; three of the tombstones are in the form of sarcophagi. The cemetery can be viewed upon arrangement with its administrator (Mr. Ronovský, tel.: +420 569 442 691).

www.golcuv-jenikov.cz

Ledeč nad Sázavou 14

The renovated synagogue in **Ledeč nad Sázavou** (www.ledecns.cz/infocentrum.php) serves as a venue for exhibitions and concerts. The single-storey building, built in the rural Baroque style in the mid-1700s, replaced the burned-down Old Synagogue, which had stood in the town since 1606. The new building was not spared fire either; after the fire, it was renovated in the Classicist style, with the original vaults, stucco decorations, and women's gallery being preserved. It is open for exhibitions and concerts, and visits can be arranged upon request in the Information Centre.

Information Centre, Husovo náměstí 60,
584 01 Ledeč nad Sázavou, tel.: +420 569 721 471,
e-mail: informacni.centrum@ledecns.cz.

The Jewish cemetery is located in the western part of town. Established in 1601, it is one of the oldest in Bohemia. Some one thousand people of the Jewish faith are buried here, not only from the town itself, but also from other nearby towns and villages.

www.ledecns.cz/infocentrum.php



Černovice 15

Unusual in form is the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, unveiled in autumn 2001, at the Jewish cemetery in **Černovice** (www.mestocernovice.cz). It comprises 53 stones alongside the road to the cemetery – the 43 stones on the left-hand side bear the names of holocaust victims, and the 10 stones on the right represent those inhabitants who survived imprisonment. The renovated mortuary of the Jewish cemetery houses an exhibition of photographs and materials documenting the Jewish history of the town. The Jewish cemetery and the stone-lined road are freely accessible; the exhibition can be visited upon agreement with the cemetery administrator (Mr. Teller, tel.: +420 565 492 057, +420 776 631 248).

www.mestocernovice.cz

Humpolec 16

The oldest written documents noting the Jewish community in **Humpolec** (www.infohumpolec.cz) date to 1385. In the first quarter of the 18th century, a Jewish community was established, and in 1760 a synagogue was built. It stands in the centre of the former Jewish quarter, which comprised roughly 30 houses; some of them survive, albeit rebuilt. During WWII, the synagogue was damaged; it was renovated from 1952 – 1961 by the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, and has been used since as its house of prayer. During the renovations in the late 1980s, colourful fragments of the original decorations were discovered, along with still-legible Hebrew inscriptions. The Jewish cemetery is found in the forest park below Orlik Castle, and is a marked point on a nature trail. It was established in the early 1700s and subsequently twice expanded with the addition of terraces. By the entrance is a 'baitstube', a ceremonial room where the deceased were subjected to ritual cleansing prior to burial. There are some one thousand tombstones at the cemetery, many of which are of significant artistic value, most in Baroque and Classicist styles. The cemetery served for Jews from an extensive area; several relatives of the composer Gustav Mahler and the writer Franz Kafka are buried here.



www.infohumpolec.cz

Kamenice nad Lipou 17

The Jewish settlement in **Kamenice nad Lipou** (www.kamenicenl.cz) was first noted in the early 17th century. A reminder of the Jewish religious community is the cemetery established in 1803, which can be found on the edge of town and offers a splendid view of the surroundings. It was renovated in 1991–1993, and a memorial plaque was placed here in 1996 for the local victims of the Holocaust. Many empire-style tombstones can be found at the cemetery, from the first half of the 19th century.

www.kamenicenl.cz



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