

Černovice and Pacov: Two Small Rural Czech Towns and Their Jewish Heritage

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We would like to summarize our experience with grass-roots conservation campaigns in the abovementioned rural towns of less than 5,000 residents situated in the remote Bohemian-Moravian Highlands area of today's Czech Republic.

Since the 17th century both towns had vibrant Jewish communities which played a crucial part in the local economic and cultural life until 1942 when all Jewish residents were deported – in most cases fatally – to concentration camps. The few survivors moved away and the local Jewish history (tangible and intangible) along with the memory of Jewish neighbours was subsequently marginalized to the point of nearly vanishing altogether.

Now with the growing tourist interest in the local Jewish heritage as seen since the 2000s we are trying to save and protect major Jewish sights in Černovice and Pacov – a renovated cemetery with a newly-built Holocaust monument, and an early 19th century synagogue, respectively – as an integral part of the physical and cultural landscape of our towns. The establishment of permanent museum exhibitions commemorating the local Jewish history is taking place alongside educational, cultural and memorial events organized by our associations for the benefit of local public as well as visitors from outside. While facing the distinctive challenges of rural setting – e.g. lower average income, higher unemployment rate, inadequate services, widespread xenophobia, population ageing and greater outward migration of younger generations – we also deal with dilemmas of sustainable maintenance of local Jewish heritage sites, their place in today's small-town life and provincial milieu, and collaboration on their current and future use for sightseeing, cultural, and awareness-raising purposes with public authorities, professional organizations and non-governmental entities.

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