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The History of the Jews in Strakonice

(Strakonice, Czech Republic – 49°15' 13°54')

The Work of Josef Havrda, Strakonice

Translated from the original Czech by **Jan O. Hellmann/DK**

Edited by **Rob Pearman/UK**

It is impossible to be certain exactly when Jews settled in the town and surroundings of Strakonice^[1]. Whereas, for example, towns like Vodňany and, especially, Prachatice did not accept Jews even at the end of the 19th century and it is also known that even after that time Jewish merchants were unable to succeed there, we do know that the Jews had their cemeteries and prayer houses in the Strakonice area at a much earlier date.

Approximately 130 years ago, there was a large number of Jews in the Horažovice area, mainly in Slatine, where there is still an old synagogue. We also know that there was a smaller number in Volenice (just three families). In the part of Strakonice known as Osek, there was both a cemetery and a prayer house, which is today an outhouse. The largest community was in the Volyní area of Hoštice (20 families), and they had a cemetery above the village of ěšnice in the middle of fields and forest. This cemetery was used not only by fellow Jews from Hostice but also by those from other nearby areas. Today this cemetery is abandoned, and its walls and grave stones have been destroyed.

There are still Jewish families in the above-mentioned villages, but the numbers are small. There was also a larger community in the township of Rábí. This is shown by the fact that a part of today's township is known as Židovna (*the Jewish Quarter*) even though no Jews live there any longer.

A note in the books of the Maltese Order^[2] in Strakonice confirms that Jews were already in this town at the beginning of the 16th century. (This archive is no longer a complete record.)

In 1509 (though according to others it was in 1511), two Jews were arrested in Strakonice and judged as having captured a gentile boy, hanging him by the feet, stabbing him to death and collecting his blood. They confessed in the torture chamber. In spite of the intervention of the Royal Chamber, Grand Prior Jan from Švamberk - who otherwise was a very religiously tolerant man and therefore was declared an anathema^[3] by the Pope - the judgment was carried out. The two offenders were burned to death above the cemetery of St. Václav. According to legend, a linden tree was planted on that spot. If this is indeed the huge tree that stands today on the road to Podsrpí, then this tree would now have reached the honorable age of 414 years.

Proof that Jews have been in Strakonice for centuries is also shown by a living witness - an 84-year old greybeard by the name of Hynek Wotic, a private businessman. He claims that his family was in Strakonice for more than 400 years, and to some extent his argument is backed up with evidence. Some ancient papers mention Lazar Wotic, and then - after him - Skal Wotic, Michal Wotic and then two further generations of Wotics.

On the road to Volyní, close to the cemetery at Strakonice, at the house where today the man who looks after the forest lives, the area was called Flusárna^[4]. Here there were stalls and cow sheds. On the walls, which were wet from urine, saltpeter^[5] flourished. 140 years ago, saltpeter was an important element in the production of gun powder and explosives. It was a very rare material. The poor citizens of Strakonice scratched it from the wall and drained it from the manure. They made good money from it.

They were therefore shocked when, in 1807, they received from the Regional Office the Decree of Emperor Franz^[6] declaring that they faced punishment unless they ceased the production of saltpeter, as this had been declared an imperial monopoly. In § 4 of the decree, it is written: "Anybody wishing to produce saltpeter or gun powder must apply to the general office of the artillery for a permit. A permit will be issued to anyone able to do so – except to Jews."

It was well known that Jews were always permitted only to settle in a certain part of the town. In Strakonice, from the beginning of the 16th century, they lived opposite the Castle behind the river Volyòka^[7]. This place is still today called "Židovna" (*the Jewish Town*). At the beginning of the 18th century, the Jews had a prayer house in Bezdikov (*New Strakonice*) and perhaps even before that a cemetery. This is shown by the old dust covered and tumbledown gravestones with almost illegible inscriptions in the front part of the cemetery. In the rear part of the cemetery, there are some marvelous and rather impressive grave stones.

The prayer house was in the home that was later owned by JUDr. Lerach. The women's ritual bath was also in the same building. Before this, the prayer house had been located in various private homes which were also in the neighborhood of today's Sokol Club^[8]. But they were burned down in 1741.

Immediately afterwards, they built a new wooden synagogue which collapsed under the spouses during a wedding. From that time onwards, the synagogue was once again in various rented homes. Behind the inn called "U tří lip" (*At the three Linden Trees*) were some small plots of land and mean houses occupied by fellow-Jews. When the Jews received the right of equality in 1860 and were allowed to move and settle freely, they sold these properties and then today's synagogue was built there. This must surely have been a marvelous moment.

The synagogue has two entrances: the main one for men and a side entrance for women. The side entrance is, however, open only twice each year, namely on the festival of Rosh Hashanah and at Yom Kipur. Some nice benches were made by the Strakonitzer patriot, Jan Vlastimil Plánek. The building of the synagogue cost 18,000 Austrian guilders.

Next to the synagogue is a single-storey building which contains the boardroom of the community and the Sexton's apartment. The boardroom also serves, when necessary, as an auxiliary prayer hall. In terms of exquisite design and decoration, this synagogue was 'number one' in South Bohemia at that time. It was equipped with modern facilities and with many decorations. It was much talked of in all the regions of Bohemia, especially during the opening ceremony.

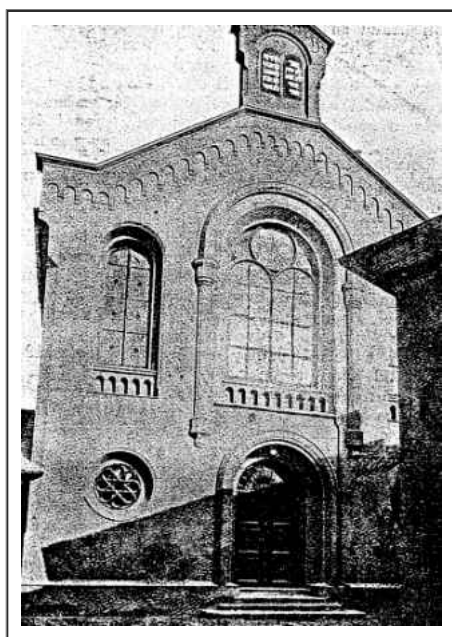
At that time, the manufacturer Fuchs was Chairman of the Jewish community. The synagogue was well built, and until 1926 no repairs were needed. But then, from 1926 onwards, the pillars holding up the women's gallery began to collapse and the synagogue had to be repaired at great cost.

At the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, the production of Turkish fezzes became more widespread. These fezzes were made by hand, and people could earn a lot of money from their manufacture. However, they were not all able to handle the income properly^[9] and, when production began on an industrial scale, only the careful Jewish manufacturers^[10] were able to manage the production. From 1817, these manufacturers were the Weil brothers, the Fürth brothers, Volf Jakub, Josef Moric, and Edmund and Josef Zucker. The factory of the Weil brothers was taken over by Leopold Gutfreund, but he became bankrupt and went to America. The factory was then taken over by J. Stein.

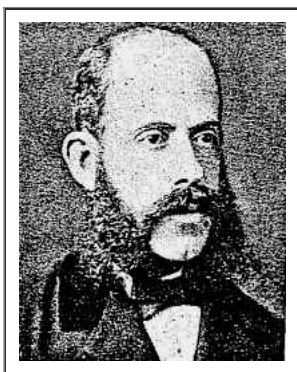
In 1878, Josef Stein built a new house close to the castle. The exterior of the house was much nicer than that of the neighboring house of the Maltese Order, and visitors mistook it for that. So the people of the town called it 'The Castle'. The windows of this house faced onto Dubovec Square, the busiest in the town, as well as overlooking the garden and other properties of the Maltese Order. The Prior of the Maltese Order, the Duke of Lichtenstein, was not happy about this, so he allowed the construction of a high wall and a tower between the two properties. Josef Stein begged the Duke not to proceed, offered indemnifications and finally taking the matter to court. The court gave him the right to build whatever he wished on his own plot, but added that he did not have the right to allow the windows to overlook the property of the Maltese Order, so he lost the battle.

After the new synagogue was built, the following rabbis took care of the community:

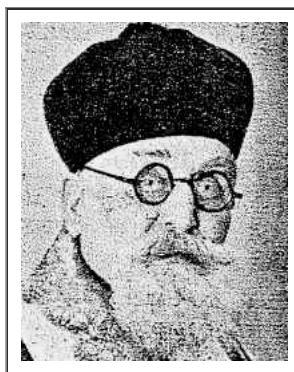
Fürth^[11]; regional rabbi Emanuel Polák; then, after him, Dr. Pražák; in 1893, Lamberk; in 1896, Denkovì and Emanuel Sittig, who was also a teacher; Bachrach, who was another teacher; during the war Dr. Volf; and, from 1923, Arnold Flaschner. The war^[12] brought the cantor Menkes to Strakonice; Menkes also represented the rabbi during his absence.



Synagogue



Em. Sittig



Rb. Arnold Flaschner

The Jews of Strakonice had their own school before they had a synagogue. In the beginning, it was a private school with one class occupying a house by the bridge over the Otava river^[7]. Today the inn "Myšina" (*Mousehole*) stands on this site. In 1875, the

school moved into the brewery “U bílého vlka”(At the white Wolf), by which time it had grown to two classes and was made a public school.

For many years, the school was directed by Emanuel Sittig, who died in 1898. After him, it was led by Bachrach and Ster. The school became a Czech school, but it did not last and was closed in 1908. The last teacher, J. Pereles, gave up teaching even before the school closed. He was a sales representative. He died in 1924.

On 15 January 1807, the Jews of Strakonice founded an association called the “Wohltätigkeitsverein Chewra Kadisha” (*Charity Association Chevra Kadisha*) which supported the poor and impoverished Jews and took care of the cemetery. Its first Chairman was the previously-mentioned Michal Votic, who was very active in the foundation of the Chevra Kadisha. Those who followed Votic as Chairmen were the manufacturers Moric Fürtt and then, for 50 years, Jakub Wolf Fürtt^[13].

The centenary of the Association was celebrated with great pomp and ceremony in 1907. In all, the Association provided 100 thousand Austrian crowns for the poor people. Currently, its Chairman is Otto Saxl, the Director of the fez factories, and the vice-Chairman is the merchant Weintraub.

The ladies' association known as the “Israelitischer Frauenverin” (*Jewish Ladies' Association*) was also philanthropic in its purpose. So too were other Associations founded later, namely: “Harmonie” and “Union der Textilarbeiter” (*Union of Textile Workers*).

The production of fezzes increased until the end of the 19th century and became a business worth millions. There were four factories in Strakonice and in nearby Mutínice. In 1900, these were restructured by their owners into joint stock companies. When the production of fezzes disappeared after the war, and was even forbidden in Turkey, the factories were able to adapt to new markets and produce cloth, blankets, sleeves, caps etc. In total, the factories employed more than 3,000 workers, servants and clerks.

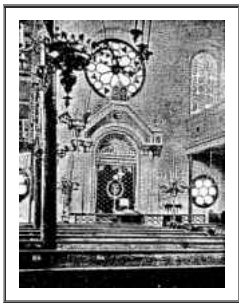
Nevertheless, there were fewer and fewer Jews in Strakonice. When the factories were restructured as share holding companies, the private owners (now shareholders) moved to Vienna, taking with them some of the clerks. In 1878, the Jewish community of Strakonice was flourishing, with around 95 large families. In 1890, the town had 7,112 inhabitants, of whom 326 were Jews. In 1900, out of 7,502 inhabitants only 186 were Jews, and in 1900 it was just 95 Jewish out of 9,882 inhabitants, and of these just 70 were taxpayers.

Part of the Strakonice community consisted of Jews from the surrounding villages of Volenice, Katovice and Štíkna. From 1914, the Chairman of the community was the lawyer JUDr. Max Brock, who retired from this role in December 1932 and was succeeded by the current Chairman, the merchant Zikmund Kohn.

The Jews of Strakonice are proud to mention University Professor JUDr. Alois Zucker^[14], who – though not actually born here - spent his best years in this town.



Elise Lazansky



Synagogue



He



Moric Saxl



Inz. Otto Sarl



MUDr. Max Brock

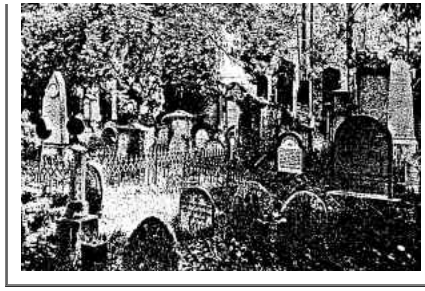


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Dr. Josef Zucker



Cemetery



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Footnotes

1. **Strakonice:** as well as Strakonice itself, various other towns, villages and sectors of towns are mentioned in this text. Most can be traced online today and some have an interesting history. [Return](#)
2. **Maltese Order:** The original medieval order of Saint John of Jerusalem, known as the 'Knights Hospitaller', was a group founded in Jerusalem in about 1050 to provide care for poor and sick pilgrims to the 'Holy Land'. After the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 during the First Crusade, it became a military order under its own charter. Following the loss to Muslims of Christian-held territories, the Order operated from Rhodes (1310–1523), and later from Malta (1530–1798), over which it was sovereign. [Return](#)
3. **Declare an anathema:** for the early Christian Church, this usually meant 'excommunication' (an extreme religious sanction that tended to be reserved for heretics), though in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition it meant 'the need for penance'. In this case, it probably means 'to curse or declare to be evil or anathema or to threaten with divine punishment'. [Return](#)
4. **Flusarna** is the Czech word for 'potassium mills'. [Return](#)
5. **Emperor Franz:** this is Francis II (born 12 Feb 1768, died 2 March 1835). He was the last Holy Roman Emperor, ruling from 1792-1806, in which year he dissolved the Holy Roman Empire following the disastrous defeat by Napoleon at the Battle of Austerlitz. He had by then founded the Austrian Empire in 1804 and ruled as Franz I (*Francis I*), first Emperor of Austria from 1804 to 1835. So he was later called the only 'Doppelkaiser' (*Double Emperor*) in history. As Francis I, he was also the Apostolic King of Hungary, Croatia and Bohemia. He also served as the first President of the German Confederation after its establishment in 1815. [Return](#)
6. **Saltpetre:** or **saltpetre** is another name for niter or nitre - the mineral form of potassium nitrate. Niter-beds were prepared by mixing manure with either mortar or wood ashes, earth and organic materials such as straw to give porosity to a large compost heap. The heap was usually protected from the rain under a cover, kept moist with urine, turned often to accelerate the decomposition, and then, after approximately one year, leached with water to remove the soluble calcium nitrate. Dung-heaps were a particularly common source: they contain ammonia from the decomposition of urea and other nitrogenous materials. [Return](#)
7. **Volyoka** is a river which rises on the hill known as Svitlá hora and flows northeast for 46 km (28.5 miles) to the city of Strakonice, where it merges into the Otava River (a tributary of the Vltava which runs through Prague). Four ancient settlements dated from between 600-500 BC were found around the river: Vinec (near Lcovice), Nimitice, Libitice and Tøebohostice. [Return](#)
8. **Sokol Club:** the Sokol movement (from the Slavic word for *falcon*) was dedicated to youth sports and gymnastics. Primarily a fitness training center, the Sokol also provided what its founders believed was 'physical, moral, and intellectual training' for the nation. This training extended to members of all classes, and eventually to women (*sic*). The movement also spread across all the regions populated by the Slavic culture within the German Empire as well as to the rest of Austria-Hungary, including Slovenia and Croatia. For many of these nations, the organization also served as an early precursor to the Scouting movements. Though officially an institution 'above politics', the Sokol played an important part in the development of Czech nationalism, providing a forum for the spread of mass-based nationalist ideologies. The articles published in the Sokol journal, lectures held in the Sokol libraries, and theatrical performances at the huge gymnastic festivals called 'Slets' (*Czech plural: slety - meaning "meetings of birds" from the verb 'slétnout se' - 'come together by flying'*). These events helped to develop and spread the Czech nationalist version of history. [Return](#)
9. **'not all able to handle the income properly'** means that they did not save for their future needs. [Return](#)
10. **'only the careful Jewish manufacturers'** means that all the Jewish manufactures were careful, whereas all the gentile manufacturers were not. [Return](#)
11. **Fürth:** the first name of this Fürth is not given by the author. However, it is believed to be Rabbi Israel Fürth (1801-74). Other families by the name of Fürth appear elsewhere in Gold's coverage of the Communities of Bohemia (*eg see chapters on Susice and Kolovec*). [Return](#)
12. **'The war'** means the 1st World War (1914-1918) in which the Bohemians, as citizens of the Austro-HungariaHHungarian Empire, fought against Russia and the Western Allies. Defeat for the Empire helped lead the way to the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia as the boundaries of Europe were redrawn again. [Return](#)
13. **Fürtt/Fürt:** although spelt thus, these may also be members of the Fürth family (*see note 11*). [Return](#)
14. **Alois Zucker:** A renowned Czech criminologist, Zucker (1842-1906) was Professor at the University of Prague and, from 1885 to 1897, Dean of the Czech Faculty of Law. He was appointed a member of the Imperial Council. In addition to his teaching activities, Zucker was a prolific legal writer, especially in the field of criminal law and procedure. His opposition to the death penalty, enthusiasm for conditional sentences and the zeal with which he advocated reform of the prison system are a testament to his views. Zucker also dealt specifically with the problem of juvenile criminality. As a member of the Imperial Council, he led discussions on the outline of a new criminal code. [Return](#)

References:





Shoa monument in Strakonice, photographed in 2011

History of Strakonice in English

<http://www.strakonice.eu/en/content/town-history>.

Jewish cemetery in Strakonice in English

<http://www.strakonice.eu/en/content/jewish-cemetery>.

Listing of burials at Jewish cemetery in Strakonice – in Czech

http://www.chewra.com/keshetnew/kweb/location_tombs.aspx?lid=285&kid=0

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