

**CZECHOSLOVAKIA.** A republic located in central Europe, Czechoslovakia was founded on 28 October 1918 as one of the successor states of the Habsburg empire. It included the Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia), Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus'. Following the signing of the Munich Agreement on 29 September 1938, Nazi Germany annexed the borderlands of Bohemia and Moravia (Sudetenland), which were populated mostly by Germans. The rest of the republic (minus regions annexed by Poland and Hungary) was called the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic. After the Nazi occupation of 15 March 1939, the Czech lands were transformed into Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia, with Slovakia becoming a semi-independent state. Following World War II, the Czechoslovak Republic was reestablished without Subcarpathian Rus', which was incorporated into the Soviet Union. On 1 January 1993, Czechoslovakia was divided into two independent states called the Czech and Slovak Republics.

**Demographic Structure.** The number of Jews living in interwar Czechoslovakia was considerably less than in other East European states. In 1921, there were 354,342 Jews (by religion), representing 2.6 percent of the total population. However, the Jewish population was distributed very unevenly among the different parts of Czechoslovakia.

Jewish communities in the highly industrialized Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia) represented typical West European Jewish communities. An acculturated Jewish population lived mostly in large cities,



Edvard Beneš, the President of Czechoslovakia, being greeted by dignitaries during his visit to a Jewish community. Piestany, Czechoslovakia, ca. 1935. (Courtesy YIVO Institute for Jewish Research)

where Jews made up only a small fraction of the general population. This was especially true in Bohemia, where 69 percent of Jews lived in cities that had populations greater than 10,000 (39.8%, or 31,751 Bohemian Jews, lived in Prague, representing 4.7% of the city's population) in 1921. Apart from Prague, Jewish communities with more than 1,000 residents existed in Teplice-Šanov (Teplitz-Schönau), Plzeň (Pilsen), Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad), Liberec (Reichenberg), Ústí nad Labem (Aussig), and České Budějovice (Budweis).

The majority of Moravian and Silesian Jews lived in smaller cities. The largest Jewish communities were in Brno (Brünn) and Moravská Ostrava (Mährisch Ostrau). Jewish communities in Hodonín (Göding), Jihlava (Iglau), Olomouc (Olmütz), Opava (Troppau), Prostějov (Prossnitz), and Český Těšín (Tschechisch-Teschen) also had more than 1,000 members.

Urbanization of the Jewish population in the Czech lands continued during the interwar period and was accompanied by a decline in the number of rural Jewish communities: while there were 205 Jewish communities in the Czech lands in 1921, only 170 remained in 1931.

In Slovakia, the Jewish population was spread quite evenly across a wide range of smaller and larger cities. In 1921, only 8.1 percent of Slovak Jews (10,973 people) lived in Bratislava (Pressburg/Pozsony), representing 11.8 percent of the city's population. Košice (Kaschau/Kassa) was with 8,792 the second largest Slovakian Jewish community. Other large Jewish communities in Slovakia were to find in Bardejov, Michalovce, Nitra, Prešov, Dunajská Streda, Trnava, Nové Zámky and Žilina, all having around 3,000 residents. The demographic structure of Subcarpathian Jews corresponded more closely to the East European pattern. In 1921, a total of 26 percent of Subcarpathian Jews resided in the four largest cities of the region— Mukačevo (Munkács), Užhorod (Uzhgorod), Berehovo and Chust (Khust) — while the rest lived in small towns (shtetls and villages). In Mukačevo, 11,313 Jews represented 43.3 percent of the general population in 1930.

*Czechoslovak Jews according to the Censuses of 1921 and 1930*

Region	Jews (by religion) in 1921	% of the population	Jews (by religion) in 1930	% of the population
Bohemia	79,777	2.25	76,301	1.07
Moravia and Silesia	45,306	1.36	41,250	1.16
Slovakia	135,918	3.84	136,737	4.11
Subcarpathian Rus'	93,341	15.39	102,542	14.14
Czechoslovakia	354,342	2.60	356,830	2.42

**Religious Identity.** Demographic differences with the various parts of Czechoslovakia corresponded to the variety of religious practices within the Jewish population. Bohemia belonged to the more secularized regions of Europe not only in the Jewish but also in the Christian context (10% of the Bohemian population was nonconfessional in 1930). Prague was no longer a center of Talmudic studies during the interwar period; rabbis from Czech

lands had to study at rabbinical seminaries in Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. Only a small group of Orthodox Jews lived in Bohemia, many of them immigrants from Subcarpathian Rus' and some from Galicia. In contrast to the situation in Germany, the Reform religious movement was not prominent. The majority of Bohemian Jews visited synagogues only on the High Holidays. Between 1912 and 1930, Hayim Heinrich Brody served as chief rabbi of Prague.

The Moravian population was more observant and—as a result of the existence of sizable Jewish communities in small towns that had administrative autonomy until the end of World War I—the Jewish religious as well as ethnic identity of Moravian Jews was more secure. In northern Moravia and in Silesia, many Polish Jews, who came during the World War I and stayed there, strengthened the traditional character of the local Jewish communities.

In Slovakia, which formed part of Hungary until 1918, the Jewish community was formally divided into Neolog (Reform) and Orthodox communities, as well as those who followed neither movement, who were referred to as Status Quo. In 1928 the Neolog and Status Quo communities amalgamated to form the Yeshurun federation. Whereas in the western parts of Slovakia the majority of Jews—including the Orthodox—had undergone considerable acculturation, in the eastern parts of Slovakia the Orthodox Jews still followed traditional patterns, with Hasidism exercising considerable influence. There were several yeshivas in Slovakia, including Bratislava, Galanta, Trnava, Huncovce, Šurany, Dunajská Streda, and Košice. Although the yeshiva of Bratislava, made famous by Hatam Sofer, went into decline during the interwar period, the city continued to be the major center of Orthodox practice in Slovakia, with a third Orthodox synagogue rising alongside the two others in 1924.

The region of Subcarpathian Rus' had strong Hasidic communities. The overwhelming majority of local Jews spoke Yiddish and was faithful to the local Hasidic rebbes. Even during the interwar period, struggles between different Hasidic dynasties—Munkatsh, Spinka, Belz, Vizhnits, Kosov-Vizhnits, and Sandz—were common. The best-known yeshivas in Subcarpathian Rus' were in Chust, Mukačevo and Užhorod.

Regional variations in religious behavior can also be illustrated by examining the percentage of mixed marriages. Between 1928 and 1933, roughly 19 percent of marriages that involved a Jewish partner were intermarriages. In Bohemia the figure was 43.8 percent, in Moravia 30 percent, in Slovakia 9.2 percent, and in Subcarpathian Rus' 1.3 percent.

**National Identity.** Varying patterns of acculturation and traditionalism in Czechoslovakia produced a wide spectrum of national identities within the Jewish population. Uniquely in the European context, Czechoslovak Jews could claim to be Jewish by nationality even if they lacked knowledge of a Jewish language or membership in the Jewish religious

community. This status was guaranteed by the official interpretation of Article 128 of the Czechoslovak constitution of 1920.

Despite the accelerated adoption of the Czech language by the vast majority of Bohemian Jews during the interwar period, the organized Czech Jewish movement was in decline. Though nearly half of the Bohemian Jewish population registered their nationality as Czechoslovak in the 1921 census, the majority did not feel any need to belong to Czech Jewish organizations. By contrast, Zionists strengthened their positions; the number of members was growing and their political position was secure due to the establishment of the Jewish National Council and the *Židovská Strana* (Jewish Party). [See *Zionism and Zionist Parties; Židovská Strana.*]

In Moravia, more than 50 percent of the Jews (by religion) claimed to be Jewish by nationality. This identification was a consequence of the more traditional way of life and the specific demographic situation of Jews in that region. Most Moravian Jews were German-speaking; by registering their nationality as Jewish, they demonstrated their loyalty to the Czechoslovak state, which struggled with the problem of having a large German minority.

In Slovakia, too, the majority of Jews asserted that they were Jewish by nationality. This was largely due to their Orthodox way of life. At the same time, the percentage of Slovak Jews who declared themselves to be Czechoslovak grew rapidly during the interwar period at the expense of identification with the Hungarian nationality.

In Subcarpathian Rus', most Jews were registered as Jewish, as Judaism was not only their religion but also a factor that determined their social, economic, and cultural identity. Their choice of nationality did not, however, always mean an alliance with Zionism. On the contrary, the Orthodox (often Hasidic) Jews from Subcarpathian Rus' and eastern Slovakia became the most persistent opponents of Zionism, along with adherents of the Czech Jewish movement in Bohemia.

**Culture.** The literary culture of interwar Czechoslovakia was enriched by Jews who wrote in several languages [see *Czech Literature; German Literature; and Hungarian Literature*]. Among those who wrote in Czech were Vojtěch Rakous, František Langer, Karel Poláček, Richard Weiner, Otokar Fischer, Jiří Orten, Egon Hostovský, Jiří Langer, Hanuš Bonn, Jindřich Kohn, Alfred Fuchs, and Eduard Lederer. Many of these writers were members of the Czech Jewish movement.

There were only two important Zionist writers who preferred the Czech language: František Gottlieb and Viktor Fischl (Avigdor Dagan). By contrast, German writers—most of whom were born at the end of the nineteenth century—were more sympathetic to Zionism. They represented the last strong generation of German Jewish writers, as the younger generation mostly wrote in Czech. German-language writers included Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, Franz Kafka, Oskar Baum, Willy Haas, Franz Werfel, Hugo Salus, Otto Pick, Rudolf Fuchs, Ludwig Winder, Johannes Urzidil, Ernst Weiss, Leo

Perutz, Paul Adler, Paul Kornfeld, Egon Erwin Kisch, Camill Hoffmann, Hugo Sonnenschein, Franz Carl Weiskopf, Louis Fürnberg, Herman Ungar, Friedrich Torberg, Ernst Sommer, and Hans Janowitz. Many Jewish writers working in or originally from Czechoslovakia played a significant role as mediators between the Czech and German cultures.

As elsewhere in central Europe, many journalists were of Jewish origin. Jews were on the editorial staff of nearly all Czech and German newspapers, from the moderate right *Národní politika* to the Communist *Rudé právo*. *Prager Presse*, a government-sponsored German daily, was edited by Arne Laurin. There were also many Jewish newspapers and journals; among the most important were the Zionist *Selbstwehr*, *Jüdische Volksstimme*, *Židovské zprávy*, and the Czech Jewish *Rozvoj* in the Czech lands; *Jüdische Volkszeitung* of the integrationists, *Israelitisches Familienblatt* of the Mizrahists, and the *Jüdische Presse* of the ultra-Orthodox Jews in Slovakia; and the Zionist *Zsidó néplap* and *Jüdische Stimme* in Subcarpathian Rus'.

Many painters and sculptors of Jewish origin were born in the Czech lands, including Richard Pollak-Karlín, Adolf and Helena Wiesner, Hugo Steiner-Prag, Emil Orlik, Alfred Justitz, Georg Kars, Bedřich Feigl, Max Horb, Emil Artur Pittermann-Longen, Robert Guttmann, and Otto Gutfreund. Several artists of Jewish origin who continued or started their work in the Terezín ghetto were Peter Kien, Bedřich Fritta, Karel Fleischmann, Otto Ungar, Leo Haas, and František Zelenka.

Jews were also represented among the leading actors, producers, filmmakers, musicians, and composers. Competitors from Jewish sports organizations (Hagibor, Bar Kochba in Brno, and Maccabi) were especially successful in soccer, gymnastics, and ice hockey. They excelled in swimming, repeatedly won the Czechoslovak national championship, and represented Czechoslovakia at the Olympic Games [*see Sport, overview article*].

**Political Affiliation.** Jews in Czechoslovakia supported a broad spectrum of political parties. In the Czech lands, however, the vast majority was oriented toward the Left. Alfréd Meissner, a social democrat, was a member of the Revolutionary National Assembly from 1918 to 1920; he was one of the main authors of the Czechoslovak constitution and served as minister of justice in 1920 and from 1929 to 1934. Lev Winter was minister of social welfare from 1918 to 1920 and again from 1925 to 1926; Ludwig Czech was minister of social welfare (and later of public works and of health) from 1929 to 1938. Other Jewish social democrats who served as members of parliament (both in the chamber of deputies and the senate) included Arnošt Winter, Zikmund Witt, Robert Klein, Ignaz Schultz, Zoltan Farkas, Siegfried Taub, Carl Heller, Victor Haas, Arnold Holitscher, Fanni Blatny, and Irene Kirpal. Several leading Communist politicians of Jewish origin included Viktor Stern and Rudolf Slánský.

The Czech or German bourgeois parties attracted very few politicians of Jewish origin. The Czech nationalist Adolf Stránský, former member of the Austrian parliament and founder of *Lidové noviny*, a leading Czech newspaper, became the first Czechoslovak minister of commerce. Bruno Kafka, Ludwig Spiegel, and Franz Bacher represented the German Democratic Party in the chamber of deputies and the senate.

The only Jewish politicians in parliament who were fully committed to their Jewish identity were the four deputies of the Jewish Party: Ludvík Singer, Julius Reisz, Angelo Goldstein, and Hayim Kugel.

**Antisemitism.** The foundation of Czechoslovakia was—until the fall of 1920—accompanied by a wave of antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence. Although antisemitism did not play a significant role in the political life of the Czech lands after the consolidation of Czechoslovak democracy, it persisted in segments of Catholic, agrarian, and nationalist groups and among marginal groups of Czech fascists. This can be explained by the high degree of secularization in Czech society, the leftist character of Czech intelligentsia, the strong personality of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and not least by the satisfaction of the Czechs, whose political ambitions were fulfilled by the creation of the Czechoslovak state.

In Slovakia, Andrej Hlinka's Catholic Slovenská ľudová strana (Slovak People's Party), with its nationalistic and antisemitic program, had dominated Slovak politics since 1925. In the Sudetenland, the German National Socialist Party and (from 1933) Konrad Henlein's Sudetendeutsche Partei (Party of Sudeten Germany), and partly also the German Christian socialists and agrarians advocated antisemitism during the interwar period. After 1933, Jewish organizations cared for thousands of Jewish refugees from Germany and, later, from Austria.

Following the Munich Agreement, both Czech and Slovak politics traveled along a more authoritarian, nationalistic, and antisemitic path. In Czech public life the humiliation of Munich led to a radical break with the democratic tradition of the first republic and to an embracing of the "politics of frustration," in which the nationalistic, agrarian, and Catholic press (not to mention fascist groups) indulged in a fierce antisemitic campaign. Slovakia gained autonomy and was governed by the predominantly Catholic and antisemitic Slovenská ľudová strana, now led by the priest Jozef Tiso. In both parts of Czechoslovakia, preparations were underfoot for the exclusion of Jews from the professions. There was also anti-Jewish legislation.

Czechoslovak authorities adopted an ambivalent approach toward the 15,000–20,000 Jewish refugees from Sudetenland (in addition to approximately 140,000 Czechs and Germans); in some cases Jews were refused entry. At the same time, the Czech anti-Jewish current was moderated by the conditions of a British–French financial grant, part of which was designed to promote Jewish emigration from Czechoslovakia. At the beginning of November 1938, Czechoslovakia had to cede southern

Slovakia to Hungary. Slovak authorities ordered all foreign and poor Jews from the Slovak side of the new border to be moved to the ceded areas. Several hundred ended up in camps on the frontier, and only after several weeks were Slovak citizens allowed to return.

**The Holocaust.** The exclusion of Jews from society following the German occupation of the Czech lands took place in a much shorter time frame than in Germany. While traditional Czech historiography tends to stress that the Czech “autonomous” government was forced by the German “Reichsprotector” Konstantin von Neurath to implement anti-Jewish policies, the situation was far more complex. Czech authorities attempted to push through their own share of anti-Jewish measures. The transfer of Jewish property and economic positions into Czech hands was also perceived as a means of resisting Germanization. Anti-Jewish orders were thus issued by both German and Czech authorities—often also by police or local authorities. However, with the decree of 21 June 1939 by the “Reichsprotector” regarding Jewish property, the Germans reserved decisive powers for themselves, especially in the area of “Aryanization” and later in the organization of deportations. Beginning 1 September 1941, all Jews six years and older had to wear a yellow badge. At the same time, Czech authorities issued a number of orders limiting the Jews’ freedom of movement and excluding Jewish children from attending non-Jewish schools.

The occupation of Czech lands occurred after the large waves of Jewish emigration from Germany and Austria had already taken place. Further emigration of Jews from the “Protectorate” proved to be much more difficult. Shortly after the occupation, moreover, the war broke out on 1 September 1939. In July 1939, the Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung (Central Office for Jewish Emigration), which was modeled after its Viennese forerunner, had been established to speed up the emigration of Jews from the “Protectorate” by ensuring complete control by German authorities over the process, this office oversaw the confiscation of property of would-be emigrants. Only 26,000 Jews succeeded in leaving the “Protectorate” legally; several thousand—mostly young people—escaped illegally (to Poland before 1 September 1939, or through Slovakia), and many joined the Czechoslovak army in exile.

Jewish communities were centralized under the leadership of the Prague Jewish community. The communities were subordinated to the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, and had to register their members as well as people of other confessions (or those who were nonconfessional) considered by the Germans to be Jews according to the Nuremberg laws. After the occupation, Jews of various ideologies joined forces to lead the Jewish community (the chair was held by František Weidmann representing the Czech Jews; his deputy was Jacob Edelstein, a leading Zionist.) They attempted to speed up emigration and to support the impoverished Jewish population. The Jewish community published a newspaper called *Židovské*

*zprávy / Jüdisches Nachrichtenblatt*, partly to inform its members about German orders [see *Židovské Zprávy*]. Precious objects and books confiscated from Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia were stored in the Prague Jewish Museum.

After Reinhard Heydrich was appointed “deputy Reichsprotector,” starting on 16 October 1941 five transports of Jews were sent to the ghetto in Łódź (in Poland) and one to Minsk (in Belarus). Fearing further deportations to the east, the leadership of Czech Jews participated in German plans to establish a ghetto in Terezín (Theresienstadt) in the “Protectorate.” Between 24 November 1941 and 30 March 1945, exactly 73,468 Jews from the “Protectorate” were deported to Terezín, with most arriving in 1942. More than 60,000 were later sent on to Auschwitz and other extermination camps in the east. On 8 March and 12–13 July 1944, the prisoners of the “Terezín family camp” in Auschwitz-Birkenau were murdered in gas chambers, representing the largest mass murder of Czechoslovak citizens during World War II. [See Terezín.]

After the independent Slovak state was declared on 14 March 1939, the Slovak government issued a series of anti-Jewish decrees that limited Jewish participation in the economy and the professions, forced Jews out of the civil service and the army, and established special labor units for them. Anti-Jewish policies played an important role in the conflict between the Catholic conservative group, led by President Jozef Tiso, and the radical Catholic and fascist-leaning group, represented by Prime Minister Vojtěch Tuka, as well as the radical and brutal paramilitary Hlinka’s Guard. While Tiso’s group promoted a step-by-step diminishment of “Jewish influence” (*numerus clausus*), Tuka demanded the complete exclusion of Jews from society and ultimately their deportation. With German support, in July 1940 the radicals prevailed.

In September 1940, the Ústredný hospodárský úrad (Central Economic Office; ÚHÚ) was established under the leadership of the radical antisemite Augustín Morávek. Inspired by the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna and Prague, the ÚHÚ accelerated the process of “Aryanization” of Jewish businesses and other property (which was accompanied by enormous corruption) and within one year had created a mass of impoverished Jews with no means of support. On 9 September 1941, the most detailed anti-Jewish legislation—unofficially called the “Jewish Code”—was passed; it applied the racial categories of the Nuremberg Laws in Slovakia. However, the Jewish Code also gave the president the right to grant exemptions from the law. Approximately 1,000 such exemptions were granted, mostly to converted Jews or the wealthy. Various ministries also used their right to protect those Jews considered indispensable (among these were professionals such as physicians).

All Jewish organizations were abolished and unified under the Ústredna Židov (Central Office of Jews), which was subordinate to the ÚHÚ.

Ústredna registered all Jews (including converts to Christianity), handled social welfare for the impoverished Jewish population, established kitchens, and organized forced labor and set up labor camps. An illegal "Working Group," led by Rabbi Michael Dov Ber Weissmandel and Gisi Fleischmann, was established within the Ústredna. By means of bribes to German and Slovak officials, it attempted to slow down and stop deportations not only from Slovakia but also throughout Europe.

Slovakia was the only nonoccupied German satellite state that willingly handed over its Jewish citizens to the Germans for deportation into the extermination camps and even to pay the Germans 500 Reichsmarks for every deported person. From 25 March until 20 October 1942, exactly 57,628 Jews were deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz and the Lublin region, and only several hundred survived. After the wave of deportations, approximately 25,000 Jews remained in Slovakia, among them mostly holders of exemptions (and their families) and Jews in labor camps in Sered', Vyhnie, and Nováky. Following the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising and the German occupation of Slovakia (29 August 1944), another 13,500 Slovak Jews were deported to Auschwitz, Terezín, and other camps.

In the territories ceded to Germany and Hungary, the persecution of Jews followed the basic guidelines of anti-Jewish policy in these countries. The mostly German-speaking border areas of Czech lands were ceded to Germany following the Munich Agreement; the Jewish population there was immediately exposed to persecution and expropriation. During Kristallnacht which mostly took place in the region with a one-day delay (10–11 November 1938), synagogues and Jewish businesses and houses were vandalized. Most of the 27,073 Jews who had been living in this region in 1930 escaped from the border areas to the interior; in May 1939, only 2,363 still resided in the border areas in a German population census. Most of these people were later deported to extermination camps, with the elderly sent to Terezín.

In November 1938, Hungary gained southern Slovakia, with its approximately 45,000 Jews. In March 1939, it occupied Subcarpathian Rus', which had a Jewish population numbering approximately 100,000. Most of the Jews of Subcarpathian Rus' were denied Hungarian citizenship. They represented the majority of the 18,000 Jews deported in July and August 1941 to Kamieniec Podolski, in Galicia, where they were murdered by the Germans. Following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, approximately 130,000 Jews from southern Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus' were deported to Auschwitz.

**The Postwar Period.** The Jewish population of Czechoslovakia was greatly harmed during World War II. In the east, only about 15,000 Subcarpathian Rusyn Jews survived. In reaction to the annexation of Subcarpathian Rus' by the Soviet Union in 1945, about 8,500 survivors opted for Czechoslovak citizenship and moved to Bohemia and Moravia. Jewish communities included not only religious Jews but also those whose

connection to Judaism was mainly limited to the Holocaust experience. In Slovakia, the number of Jews was estimated to be 30,000 in November 1946, of which 24,000 were of the Jewish faith. In the Czech lands, 24,395 people—including the Subcarpathian “repatriates”—were registered as residing in Jewish religious communities in June 1948; of these, 19,123 were of the Jewish faith.

Jewish survivors faced many difficulties. The majority had no relatives and lacked economic means. Property restitution was hindered by many obstacles. “Nationally unreliable” persons and institutions (i.e., Jews who had registered their nationality as German or Hungarian in the 1930 census) were excluded. In some cases, the restitution of small factories was reversed as a result of workers’ demonstrations organized by Communists. Court proceedings concerning restitution often were extremely slow; as a result, following the Communist takeover of February 1948, restitution was impossible. There were also instances of German-speaking Jews being interned in camps for Germans or even being expelled to Germany with the German minority. In some cases, survivors faced hostility (an extreme case was the pogrom in Topolčany, Slovakia, in September 1945).

The assistance of international Jewish relief organizations was of great importance. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (“the Joint”) helped thousands of Czechoslovak Jews as well as refugees (mostly Polish Jews) by supplying them with cash, maintaining kitchens, and supporting Jewish homes for children and the aged. The activities of Jewish international relief organizations were restricted after February 1948. In January 1950, the Czechoslovak government ordered the organization to leave Prague.

The core structure for Jewish life in postwar Czechoslovakia consisted of Jewish religious communities. In 1947, the government officially recognized 32 such communities in Bohemia (162 had existed before the war), 13 in Moravia (previously 45) and 6 in Silesia (previously 11). Seventy-nine communities were revived in Slovakia. Religious life, however, was mostly limited to the High Holidays; few communities had a quorum for prayer.

In September 1945, the Council of Jewish Religious Communities in Bohemia and Moravia was established, with Arnošt Frischer serving as chairman and Kurt Wehle as secretary. The analogous organization in Slovakia was the Central Association of Jewish Religious Communities, with Emanuel Frieder serving as chairman and Vojtech Winterstein as secretary. The powers and responsibilities of these Jewish communal organizations extended far beyond the narrowly religious sphere. Until 1948, social welfare and restitution comprised the bulk of the Communities’ work.

Although many Jewish associations had registered with the Ministry of the Interior in order to continue their prewar activities, the vast majority ended their existence after a short time because of lack of membership. Among those that remained active, the most important were the two B’nai

B'rith lodges in Prague, the Circle of Czechoslovak Veterans of Jewish Origin, the Maccabi movement, and the Israelitische Confraternität. All were forced to terminate their activities in 1950, with the exception of one of the Prague lodges, which ceased to exist in 1952.

The Communist coup on 25 February 1948 marked a new period in Czechoslovak history. Although sovietization and the growing power of Communists had been noticeable immediately after the war, the takeover now had a direct impact on individual freedoms. Thousands of Czechoslovak citizens decided to emigrate, a process that was accelerated by the founding of the State of Israel in May 1948. Israeli statistics reveal that 2,558 immigrants born in Czechoslovakia arrived in 1948; 15,689 came in 1949. The increase was due to an agreement between Ehud Avriel-Ueberall (the Israeli envoy in Prague) and the Czechoslovak government. Beginning in the latter half of 1950, emigration from Czechoslovakia was extremely difficult. Roughly 14,000–18,000 Jews remained in Czechoslovakia at the end of 1950.

A series of trials for political opponents of communism was followed by a purge in the Communist Party, culminating (in November 1952) in the handing down of death sentences for 11 prominent Communists, among them 8 Jews. The trial was accompanied by a harsh anti-Zionist and antisemitic propaganda campaign. [See Slánský Trial.]

Under the Communist government Jewish communal life was regimented and closely observed by state, party, and police organs. In March 1948, pro-Communist Emil Ungar became president of the Council of Jewish Religious Communities; the vice presidents were Julius Lederer and Egon Erwin Kisch. The Prague community elected Karel Stein, a Zionist, as its chairman, but he had to be replaced by Arnošt Polák in June 1948.

In 1947 Gustav Sicher agreed to return from Palestine to become the chief rabbi of Bohemia. At that time, Richard Feder was the chief rabbi of Moravia and Silesia, and after Sicher's death in 1960, Feder succeeded him. Following Feder's death in 1970, the position remained vacant and was only assigned in 1984 to Daniel Mayer, who served in this capacity until 1990.

During the short period of liberalization that culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968, connections between the Jewish communities within Czechoslovakia and the outside Jewish world were renewed, though relations between Israel and Czechoslovakia cooled following the Six-Day War of 1967, when Czechoslovakia broke off diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw pact armies in August 1968, a new wave of emigration started, with roughly one-third of Czechoslovakian Jews leaving the country.

Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which toppled the Communist regime, religious and communal life recovered slowly. In 1992, Karol Sidon became the new chief rabbi of Prague. Australian Lazar Kleinman took up the post of rabbi in Košice in eastern Slovakia, and in 1993 Baruch Meyers came from the United States to serve as rabbi in Bratislava.

[For a discussion of developments since 1993, see Czech Republic and Slovakia. See also Bohemia and Moravia; Subcarpathian Rus'; and articles on the principal figures and cities mentioned herein.]

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