

THE DEMISE OF THE SECOND JEWISH CEMETERY IN PROSTĚJOV

Marie Dokoupilová

A Jewish cemetery was located from 1801 till (probably) 1943 in the area bounded by today's Lidická (formerly Lazarety, Zelená) Street, Studentská (formerly Mezi Zahradami, Dr. Mičoly, J.V. Choráze) Street, Tylova (formerly Štěpánská, Ztracená) Street, and the campus of the Grammar School and Primary School. The Jewish Congregation purchased the plot of an acre and a half, with the house No. 25 on the then Brno Suburb from local burgess Josefa Budíková, before September 4, 1801. The Jews were allowed to continue burying bodies in the old cemetery, known as Zwinger, till the end of August 1802.ⁱ The location of the site for the new cemetery was probably selected on purpose, for a Christian cemetery was already in use next to the church of Sts Peter and Paul, extending south of the church to the site of today's Botanical Garden. None of the two cemeteries exists any more, as their use was discontinued after 1900. The municipality purchased the site of the Christian cemetery in 1932 and started to develop a park and the Botanical Garden in the following year; the central part of the site was left for later building of a rectory.ⁱⁱ

The cadastral map of Prostějov of 1833 suggests that the Jewish cemetery (property No. 89) had no enclosing wall at that time yet, though it had been provided already in the contract between the Prostějov council and the Jewish Congregation of September 4, 1801, that the Jewish Congregation should enclose the cemetery with a good wall. It should also employ a person to guard the funeral objects stored in a building next to the cemetery.ⁱⁱⁱ A protocol of May 19, 1883, cites the cemetery area of 6,528 sq. meters and its monetary value of 77,150 crowns. The cadastral map suggests that a small building of unknown use stood at the corner of today's Tylova St. and Studentská St., and a corner house (225) stood at the beginning of Lidická St., with its longer side facing onto the street. A plot of 1,187 sq. meters (No. 90), probably the garden of this house, extended behind it towards today's Studentská St.; the separated Jewish cemetery was located further behind.

It is not known yet when the cemetery was furnished with the brick wall, probably more than two meters high, with supporting columns and covered with clay tiles. Several earlier Jewish burials were subsequently relocated into the wall. This information is so far based only on available photographs. Plans kept in the archives of the Prague Jewish Museum

^{iv} suggest that a ceremonial hall (*Zeremonienhalle*) was located approximately in the middle of the northern side of the cemetery on today's Studentská St., and next to it a small gate to the cemetery from the same street, probably entrance for funeral carriages. Another entrance with a Neo-classical gate was located on the eastern side in today's Lidická St. next to the corner house No. 4 (house number 34), also owned by the Jewish Congregation and rented to its members for dwelling. The protocol of May 19, 1883, cites 173 sq. meters as its area and 45,000 crowns as its value.^v An alley rimmed with trees cut through the middle of the cemetery; some of the trees can still be seen in the park. The cemetery was divided into twenty compartments, distinguished by color in the plan. The density of the graves in the plan suggests that the burials began from the east westwards, as this is how the compartments were numbered in the plan, and the more westward, the fewer graves were located there.

(Picture) A part of the location plan of the Jewish cemetery in Prostějov with the ceremonial hall (courtesy Prague Jewish Museum).

(Picture) Gate to the cemetery from today's Lidická Street (courtesy State District Archives in Prostějov).

In 1896 already the Jewish Congregation purchased a plot in the area known as *Zadní díly* at the end of today's Brněnská Street, intended for a new (third) Jewish cemetery. The Jews were allowed to bury bodies in the existing cemetery till 1905, though complaints were lodged in 1908 still that this regulation was not complied with. "The Jewish cemetery was established simultaneously with the Christian one, which has been used for burials for seven years already, whilst barley, beets – and hares are cultivated in the Jewish one. The cemetery is totally completed, but the Jews stubbornly refuse to bury there... Let plague break out in the town rather than proceed energetically against our dear Jewish neighbors!" went embattled comments in the Czech-language paper *Hlasy z Hané*.^{vi} The last body was buried in the cemetery on today's Studentská Street as late as May 11, 1908. It seems that the first effective measure was a warning by the district governor, addressed to the Jewish Congregation, that burials anywhere else than in the new cemetery would be prosecuted as crime.^{vii} In the 1930's the town council adopted a development and regulatory plan, which envisaged a public

building surrounded by a park on the site of this cemetery. The council therefore intended to purchase the land and abolish the cemetery.

Talks about the purchase of the old building no. 4 next to the old Jewish cemetery began in August 1938. The council intended to purchase the building from the Jewish Congregation and demolish it subsequently. Officials from the municipal building control department inspected the property on plot No. 90 and the building site No. 225 in the cadastral area of Brno Suburb, Town of Prostějov, between Lazarety Street (Lidická St.) and the enclosure of the Jewish cemetery. “The extant properties were found in such a desolate condition that it is impossible to assess their value at all, for they cannot be removed for the price of the material obtained; on the contrary, the removal of the properties would have to be paid for.” Given the area of 1360 sq. meters (of which 173 sq. meters was the building site No. 225 and 1187 sq. meters the garden, i.e. plot No. 90) and a price 20 crowns per square meter, the building control department offered a total assessment price of 27,200 crowns.^{viii}

However, the Jewish Congregation demanded in late January 1939 a price of 30 crowns per square meter, on condition the town council would cover all the costs related to the sale, erect at its own cost a wall between the plots and the cemetery, and let the occupants of the house stay till August 1, 1939. The council ultimately agreed to a price of 25 crowns per square meter, i.e. 34,000 in total. The contract of purchase of April 1939 stated inter alia that the municipality pledged to build at its own cost a neat fence at the boundary of the property purchased and the area of the old Jewish cemetery.” The municipal finance department appropriated the house at the end of June. The inspection stated that “the building is in a very decayed condition, i.e. the masonry is cracked at many points to such extent that there are fears of collapse, chimneys and chimney doors are very devastated and pose the risk of fire, the roof is totally devastated with holes (it is all covered with tarpaper), framework is rotten and eaten by woodworm – there is risk that the roof could collapse. The house has no basement, a length of 48 m of sidewalk is missing on the street side, and the building stands 70 cm above the sidewalk level, so 4 steps lead to its door. The apartments have timber ceilings of beams; floors are totally decayed or missing completely. Plastering of the building is totally decayed both front and back. The building has only one toilet for four apartments. The yard is covered with grass, with one tree, walnut. House sewage is blocked. The yard is

separated from the Jewish cemetery only by a hedge, with an iron gate (entrance) in the middle.” Five tenants still lived in the house.^{ix} As we learn from the council’s papers, in November the municipality had a fence erected along the boundary of the property purchased and the old Jewish cemetery at its cost in the amount of 100 crowns.

(Picture) Old gravestones at the cemetery wall (courtesy Muzeum Prostějovska, Prostějov).

It was not nearly as simple with the old Jewish cemetery, although the council was also trying to buy it. Representatives of the Jewish Congregation LL.D Robert Sonnenmark and Josef Holz stated the following in a protocol written on February 17, 1939: “As concerns the area of the old Jewish cemetery, we cannot make a more specific statement at this time for reasons of religion, and we suggest that the council send its representative to take part in an inspection of the site, and only then shall we make a statement.”^x

We learn from a council’s letter of April 1939 that the purchase of the above building and the cemetery was on its agenda some years before then already. “The business dragged its feet due to resistance of the representatives of the Jewish Congregation in respect of the cemetery.” The municipal building control department, instructed by the town council on May 2, 1939, initiated talks with the Jewish Congregation in the matter of the purchase of the site of the old Jewish cemetery to convert it to a public park. An on-site meeting was convened on request by Chairman of the Jewish Congregation Josef Holz and instruction by the mayor to take place on May 10 for informative talks; taking part for the council were Mayor Jan Sedláček, building control official Vojtěch Outrata and municipal technical commissioner L. Řičánek; for the Jewish Congregation Josef Holz, rabbi Albert Schön, LL.D Arnošt Löff, Jan Sborowitz, Emil Bearnt and Josef Grabscheid.

“The representatives of the Jewish Congregation expressed unanimously a wish that the old Jewish cemetery should as much as possible be left in its existing condition, given the Jewish ritual rules. They were nevertheless willing to cede the area needed for the designed broadening of Mezi zahradami (Studentská) Street, and the road on the south side of the cemetery site; in such case the above Congregation would have the gravestones transferred at its own cost, should these be located in the ceded parts of the site.” They furthermore offered

to cede “to the municipality parts needed for roadwork without compensation, but given the sorry financial situation of their Congregation, they demand in return of the municipality to have new fencing erected on the plot boundaries at the town’s cost..., under certain circumstances and in distress they would cede the cemetery site for the benefit of the Congregation at an adequate price. In such case, however, it would be reasonable for the council proper to talk to the survivors, whose list the Jewish congregation would furnish, as to whether the existing graves should be removed and possibly transferred, or left untouched.

The representatives of the council found that given the large number of gravestones of recent dates, especially in the eastern part of the cemetery, it would be impossible to open the cemetery as a public park without a significant reduction of the gravestones as against the present situation and avoiding the necessity to purchase the cemetery, although the council would like to keep some gravestones of historic value in place, should the site be opened to public.

Two options are therefore possible:

1. To request of the Jewish Congregation for the time being the cession of parts of the cemetery for road construction purposes of total area ca. 400 sq. meters, and construct new transparent fence on a low footing of total length of 320 meters, which, however, would incur a cost of ca. 45,000 crowns, whilst the compensation for the ceded part of the plot would only amount to ca. 5,000 crowns...

2. ... the purchase of the entire site of the cemetery of total area of 6,528 sq. meters at the price paid erstwhile at the purchase of the Catholic cemetery, i.e. 13 crowns per sq. meter, i.e. a total cost of 85,000 crowns, whereby the council would be willing to take up negotiations with survivors interested concerning the transfer of graves and gravestones to the new Jewish cemetery, or leaving them in place. In such case the Jewish Congregation would bear the cost of transfer of graves and gravestones.^{xi}

The municipal building control department advocated the adoption of the latter of the two solutions, and authorization of the building control department to talk to the Jewish Congregation, “and if agreement is not reached, the council should request expropriation of

the plot for public needs.” The department recommended to start talking with the owners of plots Nos. 84/1, 84/2, 85, 86, and 87 of Brno Suburb on the north side of Mezi Zahradami (Studentská) Street about the purchase of parts of their properties with the purpose of demolition and road development.

The trustee of District XIV also supported the plans of the municipality at the Prostějov council meeting on May 3, 1939: “The old Jewish cemetery is today an impregnable bastion between Lazarety and Tylova Streets, which need more air for their youth, quite populous there. It is commendable that the council should take advantage of the time and convert the cemetery to a park, as happened with the Catholic cemetery at Sts Peter and Paul’s church. The citizenry understands that this cannot happen at once, but at least [you can] initiate talks and report in press.” This clearly suggests that the Jewish cemetery, which till then probably lay in nobody’s way, suddenly became an obstacle just because it was Jewish, and states clearly that the time was right for an unscrupulous solution.

The resolution of the town council of June 13, 1939 suggests that serious ideas of initiating expropriation proceedings had occurred because “lengthy talks with the representatives of the Jewish Congregation have not got us to the desirable result.”

From July 2 to July 19, 1939, the council posted an ordinance on expropriation of the Jewish cemetery, which was not appealed in due time. Correspondence between the town authority and the Ministry of Home Affairs, concerning the expropriation of the cemetery, ultimately implied that the only feasible way was under Section 5 of Act 261/38, which provides for removal of building and roadwork hindrances in municipalities. This would require the drawing of a structure plan for the part of the town between Brněnská and Lazarety Streets. The town council decided in mid-October 1939 to request the drawing of the structure plan of ing. Jan Pospíšil for a reward of 6,000 crowns.^{xii} The council approved the plan in late January 1940.

(Picture) The old Jewish cemetery prior to its destruction (courtesy State District Archives in Prostějov).

At the same time the town council addressed the Prostějov *Oberlandrat*, requesting support and counsel as to how to handle the situation further in order to acquire the site of the abolished Jewish cemetery. The council proposed to appoint a *treuhänder*, who would conduct further proceedings. We do not know whether and how the *Oberlandrat* responded; the papers do not include his reply. Because the local office of *Oberlandrat* was abolished in 1940 and his agenda transferred to Olomouc, later requests were sent there. The Prostějov town authority urged solution and support four times from early March to early June 1941 before it got the first reply on June 21, 1941. Based on the questionnaires and copies of entries in the land register requested, the *oberlandrat*'s office notified in August 1941 that the sale of the land to the town could be effected under the then regulations by the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* in Prague. Ing. Rudolf Konečný conducted assessment of the value of the site in the following months; however, it is missing from the files. The town authority had the land register excerpted and collected other documents required, which were then sent through the *oberlandrat*'s office in Olomouc to the Central Administration of Jewish Emigration in Prague. The council still awaited the result in January 1942, and after a few more months – in June 1942 – the Prostějov town authority requested information about the progress of the matter. The German mayor of Prostějov even addressed the district governor in Olomouc in June 1942; he also addressed the Prostějov governor in September and October in the effort to finish this still pending affair, explaining that tree nursery would be located on the site to cater for the adjacent municipal gardening facility. All further proceedings were conducted through the Central Administration of Jewish Emigration and the related papers are probably missing from the files of the Prostějov authorities.^{xiii}

(Picture) A fragment of a gravestone, found on the site of the former Jewish cemetery (courtesy Muzeum Prostějovska, Prostějov).

An entry in the land register dated September 10, 1942, reads about the cemetery site in relation to the official ruling on demolition, issued by the Central Administration of Jewish Emigration, that the land title was entered for the Emigration Fund for Bohemia and Moravia. Based on request by the district governor in Olomouc, *treuhänder* Leo Boček of Prostějov was appointed for the site, but after less than five months this entry was erased from the register. The plot ultimately did end up as municipal property – entry in the land register, dated

September 17, 1943, records transfer of the title to Stadtgemeinde Prossnitz, based on a contract of purchase of July 20, 1943. The entry in the register does not specify who the payee of the 100,000 crowns mentioned there was. National trusteeship related to the former co-ownership by the Emigration Fund was entered in the land register in late July 1945.^{xiv} The register insert was closed as of July 8, 1945; the area owned by the town of Prostějov is registered today as plot No. 3104/1.

When the vast majority of the Jewish citizens of Prostějov were dragged off to Terezín, only a handful of Jews from mixed families remained in town. When exactly the old Jewish cemetery was devastated is not known exactly yet. It is to be assumed that it happened only after the purchase of the site by the municipality in July 1943. It is nevertheless sure that the gravestones were extracted and hauled to unknown destination. A military exercise ground was fixed up on the cemetery site before the end of the war. It has not been clarified yet where more than 1,900 gravestones ended up. Some were perhaps transferred to the Jewish cemetery on Brněnská Street. Some believe that some of the artistically achieved stones of the oldest graves ended up in private hands and were perhaps even hauled to Germany. The huge mass of gravestones could be used as building material, allegedly in the construction of the road from Prostějov to Ohrozim, or even in the construction of residential buildings.^{xv} 33 photographs in the Prostějov State District Archives show what the Jewish cemetery on today's Studentská Street looked like on the eve of its destruction. The gravestones in the pictures are marked with signs and numbers – perhaps they indicated which gravestone should be preserved, and which was to serve as building material.^{xvi}

(Picture) Memorial of the Jewish cemetery on Studentská Street (courtesy Muzeum Prostějovska, Prostějov).

The site was used as playground after the war. Even fun-fairs were occasionally pitched there in the 1950's.^{xvii} When project design was initiated in January 1954 for the development of a municipal bath, there were even ideas of locating it on this site and building a swimming pool and sports facilities on the adjoining plots.^{xviii} A park was arranged there later. A school was built on an adjacent site in 1970-1974, and with it a parking lot in the

western part of the former cemetery. Fragments of gravestones are routinely found in excavations throughout the site, subjected to conservation and deposited in the local museum.

A memorial was erected in 2001 in the form of two plates, whose inscription reminds of the Jewish cemetery located in the area from 1801 to 1908. The memorial, created by Ing. Arch. Blahoslav Adamík, was unveiled on Wednesday, July 11, in the presence of the town elders, representatives of the Brno Jewish Congregation, and several Jewish citizens of Prostějov.^{xix}

What is left to do is find evidence of the time of physical destruction of the Jewish cemetery, demolition of the ceremonial hall and house No. 4, and discover where the gravestones disappeared. No facts about the subject were found by research in the Land Archives of Opava, branch Olomouc, Oberlandrat Olomouc papers, 1939-1942. The search could continue in the papers of the presidium of the Police Directorate of Brno (1919-1944) in the Land Archives of Brno, and in the National Archives, Prague.

- i Státní okresní archiv Prostějov (State District Archives of Prostějov, hereinafter, SOA PV), Archiv města Prostějova (Municipal Archives of Prostějov, hereinafter, AMP), *inv. č. 809, sign. 133/4, židovský hřbitov 1801, kart. 13.*
- ii rý (Starý, František): Starý hřbitov u kostela sv. Petra (An Old Cemetery at St Peter's Church), *Prostějovský farní věstník*, 31.8.1933, No. 12, pp. 3-4.
- iii SOA PV, AMP, *inv. č. 809, sign. 133/4, židovský hřbitov 1801, kart. 13.*
- iv Archiv Židovského muzea v Praze (Prague Jewish Museum Archives), 119 Prostějov, Chevra Kadischa papers, location plans of the cemetery, 1910-1940, *sign. 51036.*
v SOA PV, AMP, *inv. č. 809, č.j. 4393/39, hosp. Soupis židovského majetku* (Inventory of Jewish Property), *kart. 332.*
- vi *Hlasy z Hané*, Jan 22 and 26, 1908.
- vii SOA PV, AMP, *inv. č. 1971, č.j. 5965, otevření nového židovského hřbitova* (opening of new Jewish cemetery), 1908, *kart. 91.*
- viii SOA PV, AMP, *inv. č. 2075, č.j. 1018/39, kart. 332.*
- ix Karel Fraus – kitchen, living room, and workshop (converted from antechamber), gross annual rent of 720 crowns is proposed; Arnošt Spielmann – antechamber, kitchen, and living room, rent 720 crowns; Pavla Švarcová – 1 room, rent 540 crowns; Felix Spielmann – 1 room, rent 420 crowns; Marie Koutná – 1 small room, rent 240 crowns.
- x SOA PV, AMP, *inv. č. 2075, č.j. 1018/39, kart. 332.*
- xi SOA PV, AMP, *inv. č. 2074, č.j. 4929, purchase of old Jewish cemetery, kart. 320.*
- xii *Ibid.*
- xiii SOA PV, AMP, *inv. č. 2285, č.j. 17122 židovský hřbitov* (Jewish cemetery) 1939-1942, *kart. 558.*
- xiv Katastrální úřad (Land Registry) Prostějov, *č.knihy 29 (č. kn. vl. 1529-1580), č. kn. vložky 309/1566, kat. č. 89.*
- xv mlk. *Kam se poděly ostatky mrtvých Židů? Najdou se pamětníci stěhování starého hřbitova?* (Where have the remains of dead Jews ended up? Can those who remember the transfer of the old cemetery be found?) *Prostějovský večerník*, Jan 21, 2001, p. 2.
- xvi SOA PV, *fotografie L 310/1-33.*
- xvii SOA PV, AMP. Private file of LL.D Bohuslav Kraus. Dr. Kraus himself wrote critically about this practice: he deplored dancing on dead bodies.
- xviii CYDLÍK, T.: *Demolice kaple sv. Floriána v Prostějově* (Demolition of st. Florian's chapel in Prostějov). *Štafeta*, No. 1-2, p. 66.
- xix *jup: Místo náhrobků mají Židé pomník* (Jews have monument instead of gravestones), annex Central Moravia, July 12, 2001; *kdl: Památník jako stálá připomínka přítomnosti Židů v Prostějově* (Monument as constant memory of the presence of Jews in Prostějov), *Radniční noviny*, August 2001, p. 1; *mdr: Na místě bývalého židovského hřbitova je památník* (Memorial on the site of former Jewish cemetery), *Prostějovský týden*, July 18, 2001.