

INTERESTING TOMBSTONES IN THE JIČÍN  
JEWISH CEMETERY

Inscriptions on Hebrew tombstones are uniquely original. For each deceased person a different text was created. Typical information includes name, father's name (or an abbreviation indicating that he too has already died), and for women the name of her husband. Furthermore, date of death, or even burial, and the place where the deceased came from. This information is preceded or followed by a celebratory text stressing the virtues of the dead: for men character, charity and education; for women the extent to which they fulfilled the role of a virtuous, industrious and charitable wife versed in the religious rules of ritual purity (i.e. *micwot chana*, i.e. she kept the prescription of baking Shabbat bread, menstrual separation and lighting of candles at the beginning of the Sabbath on Friday night). The inscription is often ingeniously composed of biblical quotations or Talmudic passages, sometimes with multiple meanings, with numerous references and hints for those knowledgeable in the sacred texts. At the end of the inscription is the formula *tanceva*, the first letters in the verse *May his/her soul be connected to those of the living*.

In the 19th century the inscriptions became simpler and less individual and copy Christian patterns. Bilingual Hebrew-

German or Hebrew-Czech inscriptions reveal the phenomenon of double names, where the Hebrew text states the Hebrew name of the deceased used in the religious community, the other text features the deceased's civil name, often non-Hebrew. An example is the tombstone of the well-known teacher Marek Pollak (S45), which is exceptionally in three languages. The Hebrew inscription reads: *Here lies an upright man, a true teacher, the esteemed Mr Menachem Polak. He died on the second day of Kislev in 667 (i.e. the year 5667 according to the Jewish lunar calendar)*. The Czech inscription says: *Marek Pollak, a teacher for 40 years in Jičín, died on 19 XI. 1906 at the age of 73. His students are gratefully devoted to him in memory of his excellent teachings. Weary the head and heart, ailing with pain, cannot find peace in the cool womb of the earth*. The German inscription says the same thing. The gravestone is decorated with a relief effigy of the popular teacher from the workshop of sculptor Jan Štursa. Pollak was among other things a tutor in the family of well-known German journalist and dramatist Karl Kraus. The inscription was restored in gold at the expense of Pollak's descendants who survived the Holocaust, the Steinbergs in the USA.

Another reminder of famous Jičín native Karl Kraus are the three graves of his relatives, his maternal grandparents, the physician Ignác Kantor (grave G1) and his wife Anna (G3).

The plates were stolen during the previous regime and were identified based on historical photographs. The medical profession is symbolized by a stick with a snake wrapped around it. Among the graves of the grandparents is the tomb of Karl Kraus's three-year-old brother Gustav (tomb G2).

A great example of stonework is a tombstone with the symbol of blessing hands of the High Priest, which refer to the priestly lineage of the deceased (grave E5): *Here lies Shlomo, priest justice. His soul ascended to God Most High, who leads the grain and water to the poor and the weak*. (This can also be translated as *Shlomo gave bread and water to the poor and the weak*.) *He was a model to others who walked along good roads (i.e. lived a decent life), along the path of heroes of the sons of Abraham. And it was the esteemed Mr Shlomo, the son of the Honourable Samuel, a priest, teacher of justice and righteousness, blessed be his memory (i.e. the father was also dead), from the holy village of Jičín...* The date of death cannot be determined due to damage to the stone (estimated to date from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries).

A mysterious story hides the tombs of Dworl and Menachem Mendel Wehle (graves E1, E2 and F2). Mrs Dworl's tombstone is unusually double-sided. On one side is an inscription praising Mrs Dworl (she died in 1832), on the other an inscription about an unnamed man with the date of death 1812. This text is turned towards the tombstone of Menachem

Mendel whose inscription is missing the date of death. In the inscriptions of both(?) men are references to mystical interpretation (Kabbalah) and the messianic passages of the Bible. Given that the Jičín Wehle family was related to the famous Prague Wehle family, whose members were followers of the false messiahs Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank, it is believed that the inscriptions refer to their belonging to these heretic movements. This was prohibited by rabbinical Judaism from the 18th century because the movements constituted a major threat to traditional communities.

Proof of abandonment of religious traditions is cremation with an urn in a modern tombstone dating to 1922, with the brief inscription: *The ashes of engineer Jindřich Fleischner* (grave E11). Fleischner, born in Jičín in 1879, was an important thinker and author dealing with the social aspects of work, especially in technical professions. The tombstone was paid for by his employer, the Ministry of Public Works.



The owner of the Jewish cemetery in Jičín – Sedličky is the Jewish Community in Prague and it is administered by Matana a.s. with its offices at Malá Štupartská 646/1, Prague 1. The cemetery site is maintained by o.p.s. Baševi, Fügnerova 193, Jičín.

You can borrow the keys against payment of a security deposit at the Municipal Information Centre in Jičín, Valdštejnské náměstí 1 and at Café Loggie, Valdštejnská Lodžie, Jičín–Sedličky.

GPS coordinates  
N 50.442328708°, E 15.382443027°  
  
More information at  
www.basevi.cz  
www.matana.cz



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JIČÍN – SEDLIČKY  
THE JEWISH CEMETERY



## THE FOUNDATION OF THE CEMETERY

The town of Jičín was founded in the 1390s. The first Jewish families settled here in the 14th century, but we do not know where they buried their dead. The Jewish cemetery in Jičín – Sedličky was founded in the second half of the 17th century, following the assassination of Albrecht von Wallenstein in 1634 and the chaos of the Thirty Years' War, when Rudolf von Tiefenbach became the new owner of the estate. In 1651 he gave the Jews a letter of protection allowing them to re-settle in Jičín, to operate businesses and to buy land for a cemetery, from which they collected annual interest. The cemetery is located 2 km north of the centre of Jičín in the direction of the village of Valdice on the outskirts of the former fields. At the end of the 19th century it was extended and supplemented by a funeral home (*Beit tahara*, literally "house of ritual cleansing"), where the funeral table stood on which the dead were prepared for burial with ritual cleansing and dressing in a white shroud called a *tachrichim*. For the needs of cleansing a well was dug in the corner of the cemetery. At the cemetery there is also a preserved outbuilding for cemetery tools whose doors are decorated with a Star of David. In the enclosing wall of the cemetery a stone portal can be seen known as the priestly (Kohen) gates, which for reasons of ritual purity gave priestly families direct access to the graves of their relatives.

*The oldest preserved tombstone dating to 1734*



## TOMBSTONES

The cemetery contains tombstones of various types characterized by the period when they were erected. Burials began in the northeast where there are traditional Hebrew inscribed stele called *macevot* (*maceva* means upright stone). The oldest preserved tombstone dating to 1734 is that of Pinchas Lipchwicov, the son of Lejb Lipchwic of Jičín, and his wife Sara, who died four years later (grave C1). The spouses have an unusual common tombstone in the shape of the slabs of the Ten Commandments. In the Jewish tradition the dead typically each have their own tombstone.

In the 19th century burying began in the north-western part of the cemetery. Under the influence of Joseph II's reforms (including language laws) and the gradual integration of Jews into mainstream society, Hebrew language inscriptions replaced German inscriptions and the tombstones were adapted



to Christian models. They were made by regional stonemasons working for both Christians and Jews (e.g. the stonecutter family Stuchlíkov, Kraus of Sobčic, A. Vondráček of Hořice). They used high-quality sandstone mined in the nearby quarry at Hořice in the foothills of the Krkonoše Mountains.

In the late 19th century the present site of the cemetery was full. After purchasing the neighbouring land and extending the surrounding walls, burials began in 1888 in the southern part, where modern tombstones with Czech inscriptions already began to appear. An interesting feature is the set of simple small tombstones with inscriptions in Hebrew only (but with many errors): these were the graves of refugees before the First World War and the civil war in Russia in the area of Galicia and Bukovina (now Ukraine, Poland, Romania). These refugees were – unlike secular and well-integrated Czech Jews – traditional religious Jews.



The Czech Jewish community in a cleverly organized social system divided them among themselves and under the auspices of local special "committees" looked after them until the end of the war. After the armistice the refugees were repatriated. The cemetery was used until World War II and the Holocaust, in which most of Jičín's Jewish community perished. The religious community was not restored after the war. The last burial at the cemetery took place in 1949 in the tomb of the Šindelka family (grave H29). An exceptional personality was buried here, Dr Ida Šindelková Yong (1908–1949), a philologist and translator, doctor of philosophy from Columbia University in New York with a degree in political science from Paris, and the wife of Labour politician Edgar Yong. She committed suicide after being accused by the Communist regime of treason.

## BURIALS IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

In ancient Israel Jews were buried in caves or in the ground, and the site was marked with stones. From the time of Hellenism necropolis are preserved with sarcophagi and ossuary (caskets for bones for secondary burial). In Europe, the custom of skeletal burials marked with a raised stone spread via the Roman legions. The oldest Jewish tombstones come from Tortosa in Spain (6th century) and Narbonne in France (7th century), while the oldest cemeteries are located in Worms, Germany (11th century) and Frankfurt am Main (13th century). In the Czech lands the oldest tombstone are from Znojmo (1256) and the oldest cemeteries date from the 15th century. According to Jiří Fiedler (Jewish Monuments in Bohemia and Moravia) there are 334 Jewish cemeteries in the Czech Republic, of which 75 are in Moravia and Silesia. A dense network of burial sites in the Czech Republic demonstrates the specificity of the Czech Jewish settlements, namely the large number of Jews living in the country. The inscriptions on tombstones in the Jičín cemetery suggest that Jews lived in many surrounding villages and towns, for example Kopidlno, Mladá Boleslav (where there is also a cemetery), Rožďalovice, Čistá, Lužany, Dřevěnice, Ostružno, Ohařice, Zámostí, Střevač, Vokšice, Stračov and Vidochov.

The leaders of Jewish communities always bought burial sites with reference to the biblical story of forefather Abraham, who bought the Cave of Machpelah from the indigenous Hittites to bury his wife Sara (today a Jewish and Muslim shrine in Hebron in the Palestinian Authority). The cemetery plot was therefore the private property of the community and the place where the dead were buried was their private property. According to religious law a Jewish cemetery cannot be destroyed or converted into something else, like a park. Jewish leaders were dependent on the goodwill of aristocratic and ecclesiastical landowners, who often sold them inferior land (e.g. in the vicinity of execution grounds, mortuaries, in the woods, on the banks of rivers, slopes, etc.). This is why today Jewish cemeteries are found in unusual locations. Cemeteries, which are now part of the urban fabric, used to be behind walls or in floodplains.

Cremation is strictly forbidden in Judaism, as it is considered a desecration of the body. With reference to the biblical verse *Dust you are and to dust you shall return* the natural decay of the body is preferred. The tragedy of the Holocaust, when the bodies of thousands of Jews were burned without

a proper funeral, religious law retroactively treated with respect for the dead, given the victims' inability to choose.

A custom that has persisted from the original homeland in the Middle East is a fast burial on the second or third day after death. The dead and the organization of the funeral are looked after by members of the so-called Burial Society (men for deceased males, women for deceased females), a voluntary charitable association that serves to relieve the grieving family of this duty. Burial is "accompanied" (in Hebrew *halwaja*) by reading of Psalms and prayers, emphasizing the transience of earthly life, the kindness of God and the eternity of the Spirit. After the funeral, followed by seven days of mourning, the bereaved observe various rituals (e.g. tearing of clothing, special food, abstention from sex, prohibition of cutting hair and beards) and receive condolences at home. For close relatives the date of death is a memorial day and every year a prayer is said for the dead.

