

Good evening friends:

First of all I would like to thank you for inviting me to be the speaker tonight. ~ I have to admit that I am a little bit nervous, because this is the first time in my life that I am speaking to an audience in the language of my adopted country. ~ I started to learn English a little bit late. I was 42 when I came to the United States. However, living in America 25 years should be long enough to speak the language perfectly. Unfortunately it is easier said than done. ~ If I do not express myself clearly, please feel free to ask me to explain, or to be more specific.

Before talking to you about our trip to Czechoslovakia, I would like to say something about the history of the country, especially about the Jewish people who settled there more than one thousand years ago.

For many centuries the country was a kingdom called Bohemia. ~ About 400 years ago when the king didn't have a male successor to the throne, one of his daughters married a prince from the neighboring country, the so called Austro-Hungarian monarchy. This was the main reason why Bohemia years later lost its independence and the Austro-Hungarian Empire incorporated Bohemia to its kingdom.

There are many stories and legends about Jews who came to Bohemia and about their settlement in the capital city Prague. ~ One of the stories tells, that the arrival of Jews to Bohemia had been predicted by princess

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**LIBUŠE.** In her prophesy she had ordered that the Jews should be welcomed with hospitality, since they would bring blessings to the country.

The first Jews to come into contact with Bohemia were tradesmen. One of them was from Arabia and his name was Ibrahim Ibn Jacob. ~ He visited Prague in 937, coming there in business matters. Jews settled there permanently at the end of the 10th century.

As in many parts of Europe, Jews in Bohemia had their good times and bad times, but they didn't suffer from pogroms and expulsions. In general, the Jewish community was growing and flourishing, and became to be known among Jews all over the world. ~ In spite of being concentrated and isolated in ghetto, Jews especially in Prague were very active and resourceful in many fields of higher learning. ~ Many books of Judaic studies were published there. Their Yeshivas were among the best and some rabbis were even scientists, engaging in mathematics and astrology. ~ One of the most known was Yehudah ben Betzalel rabbi Loew (Löw). The legend tells that he created a robot from clay, the so called Golem. ~ Before the Shabat arrived, he placed in his mouth a piece of parchment with the SHEM - G-d's name on it and the Golem did all the work on Shabat. ~ At the end of the Shabat rabbi Loew removed the SHEM from his mouth and the Golem stopped to move for the next 6 days. ~ Once the rabbi forgot to remove the SHEM and the Golem became violent and he broke everything in the house. The rabbi than used a special curse and the



Golem fell apart. ~ Today, rabbi Loew probably would be engaged in computer science and creating modern robots.

Democratic Czechoslovakia was established in 1918 when the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy lost World War I. The whole empire fell apart - like today the Soviet Union.

The most important person who should get credit for Czechoslovakia's birth was Thomas MASARYK a professor of philosophy, who was a senator of the Parliament in Vienna. When the war broke out he left the country and was working abroad for the liberation of Czechoslovakia. ~ In the meantime Czech and Slovak soldiers were deserting the Austro-Hungarian army and joined the forces of the allies.

Masaryk spent a lot of time in the United States with his American wife and children. Her maiden name was Charlotte Garrigue and her husband took her name as his middle name. In Czechoslovakia everybody knew him as Thomas Garrigue Masaryk.

Masaryk became very popular especially among Jews all over the world, long before World War I, when he got involved in the so called "Hilsner affair". Masaryk tried to defend a Jew by the name Hilsner in the infamous blood libel at the end of the last century. ~ It happened that a Christian child was found dead before Passover. A church custodian testified as the main witness. At the court he said that he saw Hilsner to carry the child to the place where it was found. Hilsner got a death sentence. Masaryk appealed to the court and tried to convince everybody that Jews strictly observe the teaching of the TORAH which forbids



to eat blood. He forcefully argued, that any accusations that Jews needs christian blood for Passover is just a big lie made up by the Jew-haters. ~ Masaryk's arguments didn't help the innocent Hilsner to win his freedom, but at least it helped to save his life. His death sentence was commuted for life imprisonment. ~ A few years later the custodian on his dead-bed made a confession to the priest, that he killed the child and Hilsner was free to leave the prison.

As I already mentioned before, Masaryk became very known among the Jews, because he tried to defend them from any possible blood libel in the future. ~ In America he got in touch with influential Jews, especially with Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis. With his help, Masaryk was invited by president Woodrow Wilson to the White House and later he fully supported the establishment of Czechoslovakia. ~ In his autobiography, Masaryk expressed his appreciation to the American Jews and gave them credit for Czechoslovakia's existence. ~ Its constitution was drafted in Philadelphia, which was an exact copy of the American Constitution.

Masaryk became the first president of Czechoslovakia. He was a great humanitarian and a friend of the Jewish people. ~ I will be talking a great deal about this man, because of him the Czechoslovaks were always showing more kindness toward Jews even in the darkest moments in their history of suffering. ~ But Masaryk was not always of that conviction. In his memoirs he wrote about his upbringing. His childhood years were influenced by antisemitism. In one of his



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stories he tells how he was chasing a Jewish boy and wanted to beat him up. It was late in the afternoon and he found the boy hiding behind a gate as he was standing there, davening MINCHA. He was surprised to see that the youngster is praying in spite of the danger to be beaten up by him. Masaryk asked himself: "Why am I hating the Jews? What do I know about them?" ~ That little incident changed his way of thinking. He started to read and to study Jewish history, which completely changed his attitude toward the Jews.

President Masaryk was a down to earth humble person. He loved to move around freely among people and didn't like to see the police or the secret service protecting him. ~ On his summer vacation in the countryside, one day he managed to get out for a walk and he disappeared in the woods. The local police was searching for him. They met a woman who was picking berries, and asked her whether she didn't see a tall skinny man with a little beard. She said, she didn't. But later she met him and didn't recognize the president. The woman said to Masaryk: "Listen, I want to tell you, you would do better to disappear, because the police is after you."

On his trip to Palestine 2 secret service men were assigned for his protection. When they arrived there, the president suggested to the 2 men to try to have a good time and not to follow him. But they wouldn't listen. Then Masaryk mentioned to a British official that 2 suspicious men are following him, adding that he wouldn't



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mind if the British could keep those 2 guys in custody and to let them go after he returns home.

Today, Masaryk is being remembered in Israel with street names and also a town was named after him.

Masaryk was to Czechoslovakia as George Washington to the United States. He was like a father to the whole nation. Under his presidency, Czechoslovakia was as a model to all the neighboring countries which never experienced a real democracy. ~ Czechoslovakia was called the little America in the heart of Europe. It's Jewish minority enjoyed the freedom they never had before. ~ Jews were engaged in trade, commerce, industry, handicraft and in professions in the medical field. ~ Culturally they made marks in theatre, music, science and perhaps most significantly in literature. The most known among them was Max Brod, Franz Werfel, Egon Erwin Kisch and Franz Kafka.

Following World War I, Czechoslovakia consisted of 4 provinces, Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia and Carpatho-Ruthenia. At that time about 350,000 Jews lived in the country. They were the happiest and most contented Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. But the Holocaust ended the honeymoon, and only about 10% of them survived.

After World War II, Czechoslovakia's democracy didn't last long. In 1948 the communists - with the help of the Soviet rulers overthrow the legitimate Czechoslovakian government and have installed a ruthless dictatorship with one party system. The antiwestern propaganda was running high. Many slogans appeared on fences and walls, like: "With the Soviet Union for ever."

"The Soviet Union is our teacher and a bright example." However the slogan: "Who doesn't agree with us - goes against us", brought a disaster on the intellectuals of the opposition parties. Most of them were jailed and sentenced to hard labor in coal and uranium mines. The most prominent ones got a death sentence. ~ The communist rulers made up false accusations against anybody they wanted to destroy. They interrogated and used torture in such a brutal way, that almost every prisoner confessed to the most horrible crimes they never committed. ~ One of our neighbors got a 15 year sentence, because at work he put up a collection for a family of 6 whose bread-provider was in jail.

The most known person in the world who was killed by the communists was John Masaryk, the son of president Thomas Garrigue Masaryk. After World War II, he became the Secretary of State of Czechoslovakia. He was one of the founders of the United Nations in San Francisco. He was very popular among Western diplomats for his good nature, for his charisma, honesty and a good sense of humor, which he used very successfully in diplomacy. ~ The communists couldn't get rid of him with the same method they used on others, because he was known and respected all over the world. They couldn't take his criticism of their oppressive regime, and never forgave him all the remarks he made about them abroad.

At the United Nations, John Masaryk often participated in private meetings with Western diplomats and journalists. One of them questioned him: "Mr. Secretary, if war breaks out



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between the Soviet Union and the West, on which side would you fight?" He answered: "Of course I would fight on the Russian side, because I would rather prefer to become a prisoner of war in a Western camp."

The communists made a final decision about Masaryk's fate. One night the secret agents broke into his apartment, killed him and throw his body from the window. The next day the government radio and press announced that the Secretary of State John Masaryk suffered from a depressive mental disorder and had committed suicide by jumping from a window of his apartment. ~ The autopsy showed that he was dead before the body was thrown from the window. ~ The doctors who wanted to report their findings mysteriously died. ~ Close friends of Masaryk didn't believe the communist press. They knew that he was mentally stable and enjoyed life. He was engaged to the American writer Marsha Davenport and they planned to get married.

The communist regime constantly violated even the most basic human rights. Under this unbearable conditions, the remnant Jews of Czechoslovakia - mostly survivors of the Holocaust - were planning to leave the country. ~ This was shortly before Eretz Israel was established. And here I would like to give credit to the Government of Czechoslovakia for what they have done for the Jewish State. Maybe they expected that a future Israel would be ruled by a communist regime. So they drafted all the Jewish girls and boys to the army. They received a short - but a sufficient military training and were sent to Israel. ~ When the neighboring



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Arab countries attacked the new born state, the boys and girls joined the Jewish defense forces. ~ The Czechoslovakian Government immediately speeded up the delivery of airplanes with trained pilots and paratroopers. They also supplied the HAGANAH with automatic weapons and ammunition. ~ At that time the Western countries - including the United States - refused to sell arms to Israel or to support her militarily. ~ Today, many Israeli veterans, who were defending the country in its crucial times, never forget to mention the fact, that only with Czechoslovakia's help Israel was saved from annihilation.

The other day I was very pleased to see an article in the Jewish Advocate about an exhibition on Jewish history which opened in Prague under the patronage of president Havel. On May 12 two memorial tablets donated by the Association of Veterans of the Haganah were unveiled at the Military Museum of the Czechoslovak Army. One honors the memory of Jews who fought in the Czech armed forces and with partisan groups during the Nazi occupation. ~ The other expresses appreciation to the Czechoslovak republic for its support during Israel's War of Independence in 1948 by training Israeli pilots, paratroopers and delivering arms and military equipment. ~ Czechoslovak citizens are seeing for the first time the aid their country gave to the new born Jewish state.

I would like to add that even the Israeli National Anthem has some connection with Czech music. ~ The first tones of the HATIKVAH were intentionally taken from the Symphonic poem "My Fatherland" written by Czech composer Smetana.



As I have mentioned before, most of the survivors left Czechoslovakia in the late forties. ~ We were sorry we couldn't join them for serious health reasons, but thank G-d we made it in 1967. Today we may say: "Better late than never"

About 6 years ago my wife wanted to visit the old country. She applied for a visa, but the communist government didn't give her permission to enter. ~ Who knows maybe they were afraid she could overthrow the dictatorial regime. They probably detected that she could be a very dangerous person, which is something I was not able to recognize during the 42 years of our marriage.

Our joy was immense when the people of Czechoslovakia got rid of the oppressive communist regime in 1989. We felt it was the right time to visit our native country.

The preparations lasted almost 2 years. We did a lot of shopping and wanted to make sure, that all of our friends there will get a present made in the United States. ~ Our trip was postponed a couple of times for health reasons and the war in the Persian Gulf.

A few days before leaving we started to pack, but soon have discovered that the suitcases were not large enough for all the stuff we bought. ~ We rushed into the stores, looking for 2 larger suitcases. ~ Of course we had 3 more heavy pieces of luggage carrying with us on the plane. In the last minute we added 3 large bottles of Kentucky Bourbon, Canadian Whisky and Mexican Kahlua.

Shortly before leaving to the airport, Edith went on her knees to close and lock the suitcases. She strained her



ankle so badly she hardly could walk. I pictured her in Czechoslovakia having her leg in a cast and reluctantly taking a 3 week restful vacation. ~ Thank G-d she was O.K. within 3 days, ready for a lot of walking.

The plane left at 6:00 P.M. from Boston to Frankfurt. After showing us a movie, dinner was served at 9 o'clock. To our surprise we were getting our breakfast at 11:00 P.M. which was 5 o'clock in the morning European time. This was the first time in our life having breakfast before midnight. ~ In Frankfurt we changed the plane for Prague. The flight lasted about 50 minutes.

It seems unbelievable that a quarter of a century passed since we left Czechoslovakia. ~ We were quite excited to return there for a visit. ~ It is hard to describe our emotions and feelings when we landed in Prague. But first, let me explain what kind of an atmosphere existed in Czechoslovakia 25 years ago when we were trying to get ready to emigrate. ~ At that time we had to deal with many officials in order to get permission to leave. Each of them treated us in a very hostile way. In their eyes we were outcasts, traitors, enemies of the regime. A few members of the Czechoslovakian K.G.B. who were our regular customers tried to provoke us on many occasions and making all kind of remarks. One of them said: "The rats are leaving before the ship is sinking." ~ Of course, it was always our hope that their "SHIP" will sink, but we didn't expect, it will happen in our lifetime. ~ Under their totalitarian regime we always felt like being with one foot in jail. In order to survive without harm, we had to be very careful. We often behaved like naive dummies avoiding any political discussions.



After landing in Prague we immediately noticed the big change. The police and armed soldiers were not there as in the past. We didn't even need an entry visa. ~ The custom and passport officials were friendly and smiling. When they noticed in our passports, that we were born in Czechoslovakia, they asked, whether we still speak the language. ~ They looked at our heavy luggage, but didn't ask to open the suitcases. They just wanted to know what are we carrying. After our short explanation they welcomed us and wished a pleasant vacation.

Outside, two of our friends were already waiting with a little car. One of the heavy suitcases was placed on the back seat between two of us, because the car trunk wasn't big enough. ~ Now we were heading to the north to the city of LIBEREC, about 70 miles from Prague. ~ The city with its population of 100,000 is in a valley, surrounded by mountains. One of the highest is the JEŠTĚD, which is about 3,500 feet over the sea level. ~ In the mentioned city we settled after World War II. It is in the region of the so called SUDETENLAND. ~ The city had a large Jewish population with a beautiful synagogue, which was destroyed by the Nazis on the so called KRISTALNACHT.

Today there is a small Jewish Community and it has a little place of worship. We were there twice on Friday evening services and it was sad to see how things have changed for worse. ~ The young Jewish generation knows almost nothing about Judaism. Members of the congregation asked me to conduct the evening services. I tried to do my best and to please them with a few Jewish-American tunes they never heard before. ~



After the services there was a discussion. We tried to answer many questions about life in the United States.

We were glad to hear that the Jewish cemetery in Liberec was saved. We went there to say prayers over the graves of our friends. ~ Unfortunately in many other places the Jewish cemeteries were liquidated and most of the synagogues have been destroyed. What Hitler didn't finish, the communists did.

We visited the city of TÁBOR in the southern part of Bohemia and were looking for the beautiful synagogue where my cousin David was cantor, but it wasn't there anymore. ~ The communist regime systematically destroyed all the evidence of Jewish life. Those beautiful buildings of worship ~ with excellent acoustics ~ could be preserved and used for other purposes, like concert halls, libraries, museums or schools.

One of our gentile friends - a teacher - who lives in SLOVAKIA, in the eastern part of the country invited us for a visit. In the city of ROŽŇAVA where she lives, the synagogue and cemetery has been demolished a few years ago. Because we were close to the town where Edith was born, we have decided to go there by train. ~ Our friend discouraged us, because she was sure we will not find there any signs of past Jewish life. ~ After one hour of travel we reached the town of FÍLAKOVO. After a short walk we were at the place where once a beautiful synagogue was standing. Also the houses where the rabbi, shochet and butcher lived has been destroyed. From there we were heading for the cemetery where Edith's grand-mother and uncle are buried. It was a 2 mile walk on a warm sunny day. ~ To our pleasant surprise the cemetery was still there. A new fence was put there by the new democratic authorities.



The cemetery looked like a jungle and nobody was there to let us in. People from the neighboring houses were at work and only barking dogs were welcoming us. ~ We walked into an office of a nearby stove factory and tried to get some information about the cemetery. They didn't know anything. ~ As we were ready to leave a young man came into the office. He asked what are we looking for. After our explanation, he smiled and told us to wait a few minutes, that he will be right back with the key to the cemetery gate.

The cemetery was in a very poor condition. Many grave stones laid flat and among those was also the MATZEVAH of Edith's uncle. ~ Some of the grave stones were stolen by the local gypsies. Edith was very happy to see, that her grandmother's MATZEVAH was standing on its place. ~ We cleaned her grave from the high grass and said prayers and KADDISH.

The man who had the keys told us, that he is going to be in charge of the cemetery. He will clean up the whole area, lift up the grave stones and put them on the right places. For his service, he will be allowed to use the empty part of the cemetery as a vegetable garden. ~ He was very pleased when we gave him American money. He promised to send pictures of the cemetery when everything will be taken care of.

We stayed with our friend in this part of Czechoslovakia only a few days. Before leaving Slovakia we visited an old beautiful castle, built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which has a rare collection of many priceless treasures. ~ From there we went to see a stalagmite cave. It has been discovered in 1950 by accident when somebody fell into the cave. It is impossible

to describe the wonders nature has created deep underground in millions of years. ~ The area of this part of Czechoslovakia with its mountains, forests and rivers are very similar to New Hampshire.

Freedom in Czechoslovakia has its sideeffects. There is an increase in criminality. Many gypsies and homeless people from Romania and other countries of Eastern Europe settled in Czechoslovakia. Our friends warned us to be very cautious, because they are stealing in a professional way. ~ A gang of gypsies were traveling at night with the same train on which we were returning from Slovakia to Liberec in Bohemia. It is a 14 hour trip. ~ The gypsies wanted to turn off the lights, but we insisted that the lights will be on. They made us believe that they are sleeping, but we noticed that they are concentrated on each piece of luggage. ~ All passengers were alert and united against them. When they got the message that we mean business, they moved to another wagon.

After returning to Liberec ~ where we lived for 20 years — we accepted many invitations from our friends. Each of them had a lot to say about the sad experiences and tragedies their families went through since we left the country. ~ Many former customers recognized us on the street, buses and streetcars. Everybody was very friendly. They wanted to know many things about the United States, and we tried to answer all their questions. Many people in Czechoslovakia have rosy imaginations about America. They think that life here is very easy, uncomplicated and that most of us is very rich. Otherwise the Czechoslovak people love the United States for everything this country stands for.

Almost all members of the Czechoslovak Government are



intellectuals and many citizens feel it is to their disadvantage.

We in the United States complain about our politicians, but many people in Czechoslovakia feel they would be much better off if their representatives in the Parliament and Government would be politicians. Their president Havel, who is admired for his humanitarian qualities is being partially blamed for the increase of criminality, because he gave freedom not only for the political prisoners, but he also opened the prison gates to the worst criminals.

People and the press openly complain and criticize anything they don't like, which wasn't the case under the communist dictatorship. It is true we didn't have too much time to read the Czechoslovakian newspapers or to watch their TV, but our friends and former customers were our best source of information.

One day while sitting on a bench and waiting for the streetcar, we met a former customer Mr. Haman a very fine man who doesn't even know who was Haman in our Jewish history. Otherwise he probably would change his name. ~ He didn't recognize us, but looked at me and asked where did I get my comfortable shoes. I told him that these shoes were bought on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. ~ We asked him if he is still shopping in the store on NA BOJIŠTI street. He answered: "You know, there used to be a young couple who were in charge of the store. Since they left for the West years ago, I am not shopping there anymore." He was pleasantly surprised when we told him, that we are the couple who used to work there. ~ He told us many stories in detail from the area and what happened to many of our former customers.

The economy of Czechoslovakia is in a very bad shape.

The country has been exploited by the Soviet Union for more than 40 years. They dictated what Czechoslovakia has to manufacture and didn't allow the country to develop free trade with the West. In fact the Eastern European countries used to be the modern slaves of the Soviet Union. The same countries were forced to accept hundreds of thousands of Soviet occupation soldiers and their families. ~ The Czechoslovak Government had to provide modern housing, schools and build special shopping centers to satisfy their needs. Of course everything was financed by the Czechoslovakia people. ~ That was a very heavy burden to a small country with a population of 16 million.

After getting rid of the dictatorial regime, people thought, that within 5 years or so, Czechoslovakia will be able to recover completely, however it is clear to everybody now, that the recovery process may last for another generation.

We were still in the old country when an attempt was made in Russia to remove Gorbachev and to overthrow the existing government. The people in Czechoslovakia were very scared, nervous and afraid what may happen if the communists succeed to install the old dictatorial regime. In such case the Russian occupation army would be back in their country and that would mean the end of Czechoslovakian democracy. ~ It was a big relief among the population when they have learned that the "COUP D'ÉTAT" did not succeed.

To be in Czechoslovakia and not to visit the capital city of Prague, is like to be in Israel and not to see Jerusalem. Prague - not like many other cities in Europe - wasn't damaged during World War II. ~ Each building in the old city is an architectural jewel.



As I have mentioned before, the communists demolished many of the remaining synagogues, but they kept in good condition the entire Jewish section in the old city. They wanted to show the world that they are not against religion. ~ On this occasion we visited, again the old Jewish city and didn't forget to put a "KVITL" with many wishes on rabbi Löw's grave.

The Jewish population of Prague is so small, that most of their synagogues are not in use and today they serve as museums.

We visited the former concentration camp Theresienstadt. It was before the High Holidays. Because our parents have no graves, we wanted to pay our respect to those who suffered and died in that camp. ~ There was a memorial service that day with a program, on which a group of teenagers recited poetry, written by children-prisoners of Theresienstadt. ~ We lighted candles inside the crematorium and recited Kaddish and Kel Moleh Rachmim. ~ Our emotions were running high when we were leaving this sad place. We could clearly imagine the suffering of our brothers and sisters under extremely bad conditions. ~ To them, one day in this camp seemed like 1 year long, because of the constant fear, stress, hunger and uncertainty. ~ We are among the lucky ones who survived such unbelievable conditions, to be liberated and to see the fall of the Nazi era.

We were very happy to visit our native country and to see our dear friends. We really didn't get a chance to get a little rest and the 3 weeks of our stay in Czechoslovakia was very hectic.

It was a good feeling to see that our old country, gained its political freedom. However, as far as Jewish life is concerned, it seems, that there is no hope. ~ This is the main reason why we do not belong there any more.

It is a good feeling to be here and to see the continuation  
OF JEWISH LIFE.

Thank you for your attention.

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The Sisterhood profusely thanks Mr. Morris Hollender for a most interesting and informative narration on Czechoslovakia at our June 10th meeting.  
1991-OR 1992  
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