

## Introduction

### *That Children “Will Rise Up to Tell Their Children”*

I myself have written and published [this chronicle] “so that future generations will know, until the last generation, children will be born and rise up to tell their children” (Psalms 78:6), inhabitants of the holy community of Prague, in the country of Bohemia, that we had enemies with cunning plots. . . . And the children of Israel raised up their eyes and cried out to the Lord of their fathers . . . and our Lord did not forsake us, and granted us grace before our lord, His majesty, and [granted grace] to all Israel in all the places they inhabit. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Judah Leib ben (son of) Joshua, secretary to Prague’s chief rabbi, Aaron Simon Spira-Wedeles, wrote these lines after surviving, during the summer of 1648, a Swedish siege on his native Prague, one of the final stand-offs of the Thirty Years’ War. They are part of his introduction to *Milhamah beshalom* (War for Peace), a chronicle recording those dramatic events. Judah Leib expressed wonder at his own existence and strove to ensure that future generations would appreciate their past. The emphasis the Prague functionary placed on gratitude to God and public recognition of His wonders is central to many early modern explanations of why one would record or remember a particular event. History ultimately mattered, in part, because—and when—it gave evidence of God’s continued providence over Jews and Jewish communities.

The ability to transmit complex memories—and thus to bridge the chasm of death—distinguishes humans from other members of the animal kingdom. Grandparents tell young children about life when they were young; archaeologists use carbon dating to determine details about civilizations gone for thousands of years. The world’s three major monotheistic religions are historical in nature, their foundational narratives based on particular developments in human time. Indeed, Christian history so dominates western ways of understanding our place in time that every other event deemed worthy of remembrance is

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accorded a place on a historical spectrum since, or before, the birth of Jesus, even by those who hold no stock in the notion of salvation by his death. To varying degrees, adherents of these belief systems interweave deep concern with their own local histories with this fundamental, historical understanding of their place in the universe. In times of conflict and transition, as the Protestant Reformation and English Civil War, the calendar itself, with its mix of religious, political, and legal commemorations, has been mightily contested.<sup>2</sup>

For traditional Jews, an ahistorical connection with biblical past and messianic future helped shape an identity distinct from majority cultures. Especially in the Torah-centered intellectual realm, a man could be in direct dialogue with sages of earlier ages (for a woman, this process was more difficult and generally less direct); words on a page of rabbinic exegesis or biblical text were in conversation with their readers' discussion of a legal point and also served to shape responses to contemporary events. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem became a personally remembered event, equated with the exodus from Egypt: "Moses sang a song that would never be forgotten—when I left Egypt/Jeremiah mourned and cried out in grief—when I left Jerusalem," a current that could, in theory, run counter to a Jew's distinguishing current circumstances from past realities.<sup>3</sup> A line of reasoning in modern scholarship holding that Jews did not, in fact, engage historical memory on such a wide variety of levels, that no room remained for more particular, postbiblical historical concerns is based in part on the path-breaking work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945). For him, direct transmission of recollections from generation to generation helped form a society's or a family's "collective memory" (a term opposed, in its own time, to self-focused Freudian memory), which was the polar opposite of historical writing, a later reconstruction of lost memories.<sup>4</sup> Pierre Nora, in his editor's introduction to *Realms of Memory*, a monumental anthology covering the history of French collective memory, likewise envisioned a lost golden age of organically transmitted, unself-conscious memories wholly opposed to historical writing.<sup>5</sup>

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi brought Halbwachs's categories to Jewish history, where the deep concern with history of the biblical period gave

way, in his view, to distinct apathy toward postbiblical Jewish history.<sup>6</sup> Yerushalmi closely examined Jewish historical writing, especially of the sixteenth century, but laid only bare outlines of additional modes for transmission of collective memory that, to his view, superseded historical writing and represented distinctly ahistorical ways of viewing the past.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, others called into question Halbwachs's complete polarity between collective memory and historical writing, suggesting complex interactions between the two, rather than absolute opposition. And, several studies of particular instances of Jewish historical writing and collective memory demonstrated limitations in Yerushalmi's similar characterization of Jewish historical thinking.<sup>8</sup> Standing on the shoulders of these latter scholars, *To Tell Their Children* presents a case study of Jewish memory in early modern Prague, a concrete model of premodern Jewish memory in a single locale, showing precisely how memories were shaped and recorded, how ideas took on physical and literary forms.

For historian Amos Funkenstein, the prevalence of sentiments like those expressed by Judah Leib ben Joshua among premodern Jewish writers, which Funkenstein referred to as “an incessant astonishment at one's own existence,” constitutes one of the central themes of “Jewish historical reasoning” over the course of centuries. “Put differently,” he wrote, “Jewish culture never took itself for granted.”<sup>9</sup> Some modern scholarship has failed to take account of early modern Jews' concern with their local historical circumstances precisely because the forms the preservation of such local history took, the way God's immediate providence was recorded, varied greatly and often did not look like “history” to a contemporary viewer. Yet the particular forms in which the Jews of early modern Prague (ca. 1580–1730) recorded their own history depended a great deal on changing circumstances that had little to do with historical reasoning, including material comfort, fashion in architecture and textiles, and the presence or absence of intellectual circles and scientific activity on a wider scale. *Milhama beshalom* is but one example of an early modern Jew recording and disseminating information about recent events, for the historical record, in a form—a short chronicle focused on a single set of events—that has not been widely considered in discussions of pre-Enlightenment

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Jewish historical writing. Prague's Jews also used even less known formats, like Yiddish historical songs and familial rescue tales, to preserve their own histories. They also perpetuated the memory of their dead on gravestones, in synagogue liturgy, and on ritual objects.

In Prague, as throughout Christendom, the affirmation of God's continued providence over the Jews always carried also an implicit refutation of the Christian claim that God had rejected the Jews as his chosen Israel, as made clear by their forsaken state. Jewish life in medieval Europe had been characterized by ongoing polemic with the Christians among whom they lived, who viewed themselves as having already, in ancient times, superseded the Jews as God's chosen Israel, while any remaining Jews were simply blind to God's true revelation. Judah Leib's statement that "God did not forsake us before our lord," means "God showed our earthly ruler, Emperor Ferdinand II (known as ardent in his Catholicism), that He still protects us, the Jews." About a century earlier, Elijah Capsali (ca. 1490–ca. 1555), a rabbi and historian from Candia, Crete, a Venetian possession, had written in his historical work, *Seder Eliyahu zuta*:

But my reasons for this composition and the benefits that accrue from it are twofold. . . . The first is to teach man wisdom and understanding in hearing the stories of the kings . . . The second is that all the people of the earth might know that the Lord is God, and that God judges on earth. For when he who looks fears, and glancing over my stories . . . accepts the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, then [shall he] know that the eyes of the Lord scan the whole earth, beholding evil and good . . . He looks over the gentiles as well, to raise this nation up and to cast that one down . . .<sup>10</sup>

Judah Leib thus echoed a theme expressed earlier by the more famous Capsali, and others, in viewing history as vindicating the Jews and demonstrating God's protection of them. In defining "historical writing," modern scholars sometimes seek impartiality, and such religious sensibilities as Capsali and Judah Leib expressed may seem to negate the possibility of the objectivity a historian should have. But that view is anachronistic.

Alongside gratitude at their own continued existence coupled with celebration of God's providence, grief and mourning also drove

Prague's Jews to commemorate the recent past for future generations. Mourning might be expressed on a gravestone for an individual who died of natural causes or in liturgical laments for tragic loss of life, as in fire, war, or anti-Jewish rioting. Communal leaders could also be moved by political pragmatism, usually joined with genuine gratitude, to construct commemorative liturgies celebrating the protection of the local ruler against physical danger and expressing loyalty to him and his regime. A paterfamilias might likewise record a narrative that defended the family name against accusations or denunciations.

Whatever the impetus, when moved to pass a story or memory on to future generations, a Prague Jew, like any author, needed to find an appropriate form in which to record it. Today, if a person feels the story of her own life is worth telling, or might reap profits, she is well aware of the genre of autobiography and the kinds of stories readers might expect to find there. But what would such a person do had she never read an autobiography? The shapes the memories of Prague Jews took on depended greatly on the literary and artistic genres that were known to them and those that developed over time in Prague and elsewhere in its environs. Cultural and material conditions, gender, socioeconomic status, and the still-evolving role of print technology all played roles as well. A twenty-first-century author is much more likely to write and publish an autobiography if he has a rags-to-riches, or addiction-to-sobriety, story to tell than if he worked diligently in his middle-class suburban high school and competitive college to eventually become a successful lawyer or banker. The literary forms that are common and familiar help shape what kinds of memories will be preserved. Likewise, in early modern Prague, the literary and artistic genres available for the preservation of memories, and the ways those genres developed over time, helped shape which memories would be preserved and how.

*To Tell Their Children* is an investigation of these manifold ways in which Prague's early modern Jews recorded their own past. In its most intimate, perhaps most instinctual form, memory can serve as a bridge between the living and the dead, a way to maintain ties with those who are no more. (In Prague, as in many premodern communities, the dead continued to perform important functions in society.)<sup>11</sup>

Gravestones, ritual objects, and a weekly liturgy for the dead helped to create this bridge and to keep the dead actively involved in the daily activities of the living. As aesthetic sensibilities changed, beginning toward the end of the sixteenth century, gravestones and other memorials became more elaborate, placing more emphasis on the many qualities and achievements of the dead and somewhat obfuscating the interactions between them and the living. As individuals' life stories came to occupy a greater place in commemorations of them, families also sought to preserve and perpetuate stories of living members, especially patriarchs. These stories found their way into the introductions to published books and also appeared as freestanding, handwritten tales of deliverance that established a familial "Purim" day, based on the biblical Purim. In addition to celebrating rescue, these tales justified the author-protagonist's actions and defended his family name.

Communal officials acted similarly at times, creating liturgies for local annual commemorations for the community as a whole that celebrated rescue from existential threat, real or perceived, while at the same time promoting a specific political line. The particular ways in which such liturgies were written depended in part on both local traditions and the existence, or lack thereof, of a reasonably functional communal authority. When the financial pressures of a state at war, or the social stress of a regime eagerly promoting Catholic renewal—together with the internal bickering both situations could exacerbate—mounted too large, local commemorations became less original and less self-confident. The recording of historical events outside the ceremonial context followed a similar path. Just one major Hebrew historical chronicle was published in early modern Prague, David Gans's *Zemah David* (Sprout of David/Branch of David), in 1592.<sup>12</sup> Later events were recorded in the introductions to some of the special liturgies and in more specialized historical writing like *Milhama beshalom*. Another genre also appeared, the Yiddish historical song, a report of recent events meant primarily to spread news among surrounding Jewish communities. These changes developed hand in hand with gradual transformations in gender roles and in the relationships between print and manuscript publication, between writing in the sacred and vernacular tongues. By the turn of the eighteenth century,

Prague's Jewish community had changed enormously, and the ways in which its members recorded their history had evolved as well.

All this took place within a community firmly entrenched in a set of traditions and way of life that saw itself as continuous over the past centuries and more, a community governed internally by a legal system that had developed over thousands of years. In diet, calendar, language, and dress, Prague's Jews, several thousand in number by the end of the sixteenth century, set themselves apart from local cultures and identified with Jews worldwide, while simultaneously adopting and adapting local norms.<sup>13</sup> The local commemorative liturgies they composed, like the fixed aspects of liturgy shared with Jews worldwide, emphasized their identity with that dispersed people, as with their shared biblical past and messianic future. At the same time, Prague Jews' integration of their own recent past with the larger picture of Jewish history, be it in liturgical commemoration or historical writing, showed how confidently they viewed their own existence as equally valuable members of that ancient tradition, whose lives were likewise equally meaningful. Their own stories were woven into it. They understood that their own additions were particular to this community—that itself was widely accepted in other realms where local custom dictated variations in liturgy or other practice—but at the same time these variations were always part of a larger whole. Gans's historical writing likewise confidently viewed the history of Prague's Jews as the natural continuation of the history of all Jews.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, Prague's population had grown to approximately forty thousand, of whom about a quarter were Jews, while the diversity of its religious life had constricted radically, at least in public, to Catholics and Jews only. The political cohesion of its always fractious Jewish community had been broken down even further. Yet, at the same time, the uses and varieties of print continued to increase—including its expansion in the vernacular Yiddish—as growing participation of women and different socioeconomic classes of men in reading and writing helped reshape their places in the Jewish world. In addition, throughout Jewish Europe—perhaps first among the descendants of Iberian Jews now living in Amsterdam and elsewhere in western Europe—sacral affairs and religious authority became more

decidedly concentrated within the synagogue and in the ritual realm, while other aspects of Jewish life pulled themselves loose, gradually and unevenly, from religious authority.<sup>14</sup> The Jews of Prague produced literature of smaller scale and often of lesser quality, and at the same time history became more specialized. Later historians, in their search for predecessors, have not always looked into all the corners of early modern life where historical memory once expressed itself.

An important center for European Jewry throughout the seventeenth century, by the early eighteenth, Prague was home to one of the most populous Jewish communities in Europe, a fitting site for the present case study of early modern memory.<sup>15</sup> An examination of one particular Jewish community can make no claim to Jewish Prague's unique or, to the contrary, representative nature as regards communal memory; by constructing a single community's portrait, I intend to raise questions about others. The study's period of focus opens around 1583, when Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1576–1611) moved his capital to Prague from Vienna, and the city and its Jewish community flourished. In order to concentrate on a traditional Jewish community, one seeing itself as beholden to the framework of normative rabbinic law, it closes on the brink of eighteenth-century *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), with the tenure as chief rabbi of David Oppenheim (1703–1736), an avid bibliophile and collector of rare manuscripts and ephemera alike.

Thanks to Oppenheim's collecting activities, rare exemplars of printed booklets have been preserved, his collection now housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. In the mid-nineteenth century, more scholars in Prague began to collect objects and documents important to the community's history, spurred on decades later by implementation of a radical plan for urban sanitization and revitalization during which, starting in 1896, most of the Jewish Quarter was leveled and entirely rebuilt, just six of the original synagogues left standing.<sup>16</sup> Today's surviving historical record has much to do with decisions made in those years, including the 1906 opening, thanks in large part to the efforts of Salomon Hugo Lieben, of the city's Jewish museum, among the earliest of a wave of such institutions in Europe.<sup>17</sup> Under the German occupation of World War II, a collaboration of sorts between museum workers and Nazi authorities created



a “Central Jewish Museum” under continued Jewish operation that successfully preserved the museum’s holdings and added to them additional collections of Jewish art and ritual objects from throughout Bohemia and Moravia, even as deportations of workers continued.<sup>18</sup> In 1950, the holdings and buildings were nationalized and became the State Jewish Museum. Returned to the Jewish community in 1994, the Jewish Museum in Prague is still the central address for study of the community’s history and now houses a rich collection of manuscripts, printed material, ritual objects, and additional materials. Ongoing publications of its exhibition catalogs are among the most important new resources for the study of early modern Prague Jewry.<sup>19</sup>

Lieben and fellow scholars also engaged, from the late nineteenth century until 1938, in research regarding the history of Prague’s Jews, including studies of Hebrew and Yiddish texts in which the Jews of premodern Prague recorded their own history, a line of inquiry continued decades later by Prague literary scholar Jiřina Šedinová, and most recently by some of her students.<sup>20</sup> Lieben’s and Šedinová’s works, together with those of Otto Muneles and Milada Vilímková on the Old Jewish Cemetery and Jewish Quarter in Prague, and additional publications of the museum’s collections, form important building blocks for the current study.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, prewar historians, foremost among them Tobias Jakobovits, who along with Josef Polák was one of the last surviving professional staff of the prewar Jewish Museum, laid the foundations for an understanding of the community’s political and institutional history, relying primarily on archival records in Czech, German, and Latin.<sup>22</sup> Jakobovits delved into the political intrigue that plagued Bohemian Jewry, particularly in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>23</sup> During the communist years, Jan Heřman published some additional studies of the political structure of Prague Jewry, and Jakobovits’s work has been most directly continued today by Alexandr Putík, of the Jewish Museum in Prague. Several younger scholars, from Prague and elsewhere, are now reaching more deeply into archival records, their works complementing this book’s primary focus on Jewish Prague’s literary records.<sup>24</sup>

All told, Prague’s Jewish community of the late sixteenth through the early eighteenth centuries, which inhabited a cosmopolitan and

storied city on the border between central and eastern Europe and left behind a rich material and documentary record, provides an excellent setting for a closer investigation of this early modern Jewish memory. Its most basic forms of communal memory were inscribed in the very shapes of the synagogues, streets, and homes of the Jewish Town and the rhythms of its calendar.