

Jewish Community and Religious Practice in Prague Synagogues from the mid-19th Century until the Shoah

This historical ethnographic study examines the Prague Jewish community and its c. 30 synagogue congregations in the second half of the 19th century until the Shoah through the prism of their musical-liturgical practices. This research constitutes an in-depth investigation of liturgical and religious phenomena and developments which have hitherto been neglected in research on Czech-German-Jewish history of Prague and in accounts of the music history of the Czech Lands. The central question is, which forms and meanings Jews gave to their praying and acting in Prague synagogues in that period. The study is based mainly on archival research and analysis of written sources like community and official records, periodicals and written music collections as well as material sources and oral history. Three main aspects cross through the entire study: the organization aspects, the actors and the practice frame.

The focus of the first part of the study is based on the structural situation of the Prague Israelite (later Jewish) Community as the umbrella organization and the largely autonomous, and therefore religiously manifold, individual synagogue congregations. Furthermore, the tasks and roles of the actors of the musical-liturgical practice are examined, i. e. those persons and groups that contributed to the chant and the music in the synagogue services. Namely, these were the attenders at synagogue, the precentor (also chazzan or cantor), singing groups like the *Boruch Scheomar* confraternities and synagogue choirs as well as the organ playing established in some of the big Prague synagogues along with the introduction of choirs.

The second part of the study focuses on the multiple and entangled self-understandings and collective connectedness of Prague Jews and their expression within the religious practice. These are examined on three levels:

1. As the members of one synagogue congregation. The religious heterogeneity and positioning of individual synagogue communities in Prague in relation to one another are examined. The focus is on the examination of the impact of an inner Jewish action of modernisation - the 'regulated service' (geregelter Gottesdienst) on the one hand and, on the other hand, the consequences of an external action of modernisation - the 'assanation', i. e. the demolition of the former Prague Jewish quarter. Both phenomena had effects on the religious everyday life and the inner structure of the Jewish community. A case study showing these changes and negotiation processes is the research of the musical-liturgical practice of three synagogue congregations – of the New synagogue, the Zigeuner synagogue and the Großenhof synagogue. Following the demolition of their synagogues, these three congregations united and built a new synagogue, the Jubilee synagogue.

2. As Prague Jews. The positioning of the Prague community in contrast with Jewish communities in other places is examined. In this chapter the focus is on ways of written and oral transmission and the transfer of melodies between Jewish communities. Subsequently, narratives of local traditions are explored on the basis of texts and music publications from the period being researched. These are both documentations in form of notation and recordings of liturgical music from the Czech Lands as well as descriptions of Prague traditions. I examine which practices, prayers and chants were perceived as specifically local traditions and how these have been fostered and anchored in collective practices.

3. As subjects, citizens and members of language and national groups. Here, the positioning of the Prague Jews within the greater society in terms of language, cultural or national belonging and towards the ruler and state authorities are examined. Firstly, the focus is on the use of Hebrew, German and Czech language in the Jewish community and in the services; subsequently on the expression of loyalty towards the state and the ruler, which was often expressed in certain liturgical or symbolical actions, like the naming of synagogues after the monarch, festival services and prayers for the sovereign and his family, the singing of the national anthem as well as specifically composed musical works. Finally, Jewish music and singing associations and their activities in Prague are investigated. These associations often had close personal connections to the music in synagogues even though they themselves very rarely performed in religious contexts. Some of these associations show a proximity to the national and cultural movements of Prague Jews.