Remembering the Jewish Community of

Bilke, Czechoslovakia

Remembered by Shelley Spar

The town of Bilke, in Czechoslovakia, was home to my mother's family. It was a small town of about 6,000 people, with perhaps as many as 500 Jewish families. The Jews kept mostly to themselves. Many relatives married one another, so the feeling among the Jewish community was one of "extended family." The social, educational, and religious life centered around one of the two synagogues. All Jews supported the synagogues to the extent that they were able. If, however, a Jew did not pay his fair share, the shochet would not slaughter his chickens. The rabbi of each synagogue was very revered and his lessons were taken very seriously. To this day, my mother remembers many of her rabbi's teachings.

The harvest was a special time of year for the children. They would play in the newly-threshed wheat and get their mattresses stuffed with fresh straw. People worked together to help each other, for survival took a lot of effort. The Jewish residents of Bilke were basically optimists, and considered their existence in this town to be a good way of life.

In 1939, Germany gave Bilke to Hungary, and the Jews began to lose many of their freedoms. Existence became harder and harder. Families were broken up as the young men were sent off to forced labor camps. During Passover, 1944, the German masters of the Hungarians ordered the Jews to be rounded up and deported to concentration camps. So ended the Jewish community of Bilke.