



THE PRAGUE JEWISH CEMETERY 1989 and 2007

PRAGUE, 1989

Czechoslovakia in 1989 was still communist. I was visiting the Director of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague. The sun was shining in the crisp spring air, and as I looked out the window, I caught a glimpse of the Old Jewish Cemetery.

There was magic to the wilderness where stone is placed on stone. The sun struck the edges of the tombstones so they glistened and danced. I returned with tripod and cameras and enjoyed the solitude and calm of this untended, tourist-free 15th century wonderland.



THE OLD JEWISH CEMETERY, PRAGUE - HISTORY

The Old Jewish Cemetery lies in Prague's Jewish Quarter. The number of tombstones, which have survived to this day, exceeds 12,000; and it is believed that the cemetery contains more than 100,000 graves. Among many important personalities buried at the cemetery include Rabbi Maharal Löw (d. 1609), Mordechai Maisel (d. 1601), David Gans (d. 1613), and David Oppenheim (d. 1736). The oldest tombstone is that of the revered rabbi and poet Avigdor Kara, who died in 1439. The cemetery has at least twelve layers of graves, and this explains why the tombstones in the cemetery are placed so closely to each other.

QUESTIONS

Why did the Nazis, who set out to destroy the Jewish people, let this great monument, set in prime real estate in the centre of Prague, survive?

Ginsberg speaks of the inherent survival power of great art. Art speaks to potential vandals, and through this power protects itself from destruction.

Does the Jewish Cemetery in Prague illustrate this concept?

I have asked this question of Jewish scholars and the most convincing reply has been that the Nazis intended to create a museum of the Jews to show what they had destroyed. I have found this argument not fully convincing and I lean to the Ginsburg concept due to my own emotional response to the beauty of this strange architecture. At the same time, one of the arguments I like most is that the spirit of the Golem of Prague would not permit its destruction.



Photographs taken in Prague 2007 showing the commercialism which came with tourism.

PRAGUE, 2007 - SEARCHING FOR THE GOLEM

I returned to Prague in 2007 and was determined to re-photograph the cemetery. I was horrified by the multitude of tourists, the formalised pathways and ropes constraining the mass of people to protect the gravestones. I spent some hours using both my new digital camera and my trusty Widelux but I was discontented with my results. Making photographs that are memorable requires more than just camera, light and a story. It requires a type of harmony, unity, and an indefinable something, which I can best explain as becoming emotionally attached to the subject so that the images almost make themselves.



Although the cemetery continues to exist and has survived so much adversity it is a different place now to that place I had visited in the spring of 1989.

I see these photographs as being an historical record as well as an interpretation of a place of great beauty and emotional charge.



Around 250BC, Chinese emperor Sima Qian ordered the construction of a Terracotta Army consisting of more than 8,000 soldiers to keep him company and protect him in the afterlife. At the 2008 Sydney Biennial, British sculptor Antony Gormley produced Asian Field, an installation of 80,000 handmade clay figurines in order to “try to make a surrogate world population, as the unborn, the future, the possible inheritors of the earth”, said the artist. As I gazed at the uniform armies of Chinese terracotta soldiers and thousands of tiny black eyes that stared back at me from Gormley’s statuettes, I asked myself, is this another manifestation of the Golem, protecting us in this life and the next?



Asian Field, by sculptor Antony Gormley, part of the 2008 Sydney Biennale.