

Portmann, Kateřina et al.: *Návrat domů. Po stopách obětí holocaustu v Liberci* [Returning Home. In the Footsteps of Holocaust Victims in Liberec].

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One of the characteristically brutal traits associated with the Holocaust were the Nazi regime's unequivocal attempts to dehumanize its victims. They gradually deprived "undesirables" of opportunities for involvement in economic, social and cultural life, thereby slowly stripping them of their human dignity. As a result of these discriminatory measures, the affected people systematically ended up in what was called the "ghetto without walls", leaving them isolated from majority society, which was then free to forget them. This slow process enabled consequent rapid deportation to actual ghettos, concentration camps, and death camps. Any traces of Jews, and indeed their stories, were to be erased from human civilization and memory. This process was particularly swift in the Liberec region. After the end of the Second World War, a mere fraction of the former Jewish population returned to settle in the city. In addition, those who knew the Jews in question and could remember them also disappeared from Liberec, a city in the North of Bohemia with a predominant German-speaking population until 1945, as a result of the post-war expulsion of the original German-speaking population. The book *Returning Home* (Návrat domů) aims to restore the fates and identities of vanished Liberec citizens to public consciousness because, as is written in the Talmud, "a person is only forgotten when their name is forgotten" (p. 16).

A total of 81.000 men, women, and children from the Czech Lands died in the Holocaust. This included at least 716 people from Liberec, including some who did not identify as Jews in either the religious or the ethnic sense. Based on the Nuremberg Laws, the Nazi regime defined "undesirables" in line with their own racial criteria, but it also persecuted people who did not consider themselves Jewish (p. 11). Current research indicates that 771 citizens originally from Liberec were deported to a ghetto, concentration camp, or death camp; only 55 of them survived the war. Those deported were guilty only of being born – and of later being designated Jewish under the Nuremberg Laws. Under the prevailing circumstances, this designation was tantamount to a death sentence (p. 13-14). The publication *Returning Home* presents the stories of several inhabitants of Liberec whose lives were upended by the Holocaust.

The research is based on a scholarly project led by Kateřina Portmann at the Department of History at the Technical University of Liberec and realized together with a group of graduates. The book tells the stories of several families from the social and business elites of interwar Liberec: We can read about the families of four lawyers – Otto Straschnov, Leopold Langstein, Artur Nestadtel, and Gustav Glaessner – who are Jitka Pánková's subjects of study. Tomáš Petrů acquaints readers with the turbulent life and fate of the outstanding scholar Harry J. Benda, who achieved a glittering career as a specialist on Indonesia at a top university in the United States of America while remaining practically unknown in the Czech Lands. Other texts are co-authored with Kateřina Portmann: Ondřej Sladký and Sabina

Korosová tell the stories of the families of other Liberec lawyers, namely Jaroslav Rosenbach and Walther Perlmann. Veronika Rohličková analyses the fate of the family of Siegfried Freund, a doctor; his descendants included the Communist politician Ludvík Frejka, who was condemned to death in the trial of Rudolf Slánský and his co-defendants. Tomáš Bendásek focuses his attention on the family of Anna and Otto Goltz, distinguished textile merchants in the Liberec region.

The stories in the book share many similarities while also being very different. The authors use the specific cases to demonstrate the utter depravity of the Nazi regime's racial policy and practice, with the chapters dedicating space to families affected by the Holocaust regardless of whether their members identified as Jews in the ethnic or religious sense. Among those who lost their lives, we find active members of the Liberec Jewish community, converts to Christianity, and even adherents and active supporters of the policies of the Sudeten German Party (SdP). We also encounter individuals claiming Czech, German, and Jewish nationality. The majority were not long-term inhabitants; most frequently, they had arrived in Liberec and settled there during the early years of the 20th century, a time when the city's dynamic development made it a tempting prospect not only for new arrivals. Later, in interwar Liberec, these individuals formed an integral part of the city's social elite. The construction of their top-quality family villas also made a significant mark on the city's public spaces. Alongside their personal, professional, or business interests, many of these people were also socially engaged, being active as patrons in various associations or contributing their own work to the (local) press. They were definitely not "invisible".

In *Returning Home*, the authors use in-depth analyses of the stories of individual families to demonstrate that the people designated as Jews by the Nuremberg Laws constituted a highly heterogeneous group. To put it differently, the Jews were not an isolated community on the margins of society as defined by the Nazis, but rather an inherent and frequently very important part of it.

The research preceding this publication was greatly enriched by the descendants of survivors, that is, of those who managed to leave in time – usually young people whose departure into exile helped their parents, who did not survive the Holocaust themselves. Today, these descendants live in many places around the world, often speak their parents' mother tongue only rudimentarily or not at all, and – exceptions apart – do not identify as Jewish, either in terms of ethnicity or religion.

Learning about the lives of victims, survivors, and their descendants and life's work leads us to realize that Liberec, and indeed the entire Czech Republic, lost a great deal with them. When we consider the contents of the book *Returning Home*, we come to understand that many of the survivors and their family members unequivocally subscribed to the creed of eminent neurologist, psychiatrist, founder of existential analysis and speech therapy, and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl "to say yes to life, in spite of everything" (p. 17).

The stories of individual families, told in detail and with care, are also highly readable. Likewise noteworthy are the beautiful, embossed typography and unique cover, supplemented by several perforations creating a special aesthetic impression. In addition, the book also contains black-and-white photos – mostly photos of vic-

tims and survivors along with their families, their homes, and preserved personal documents. These photos illustrate the text as well as amplifying the weight and gravity which almost inevitably strikes the reader given the subject matter. The book – and indeed the entire project of which it forms a part – enjoyed great success: They were jointly awarded the *Počín na území města* (City Achievement) prize. The publication itself became the Liberec Region Book of the Year 2025 and was even longlisted for the prestigious *Magnesia Litera* prize for publishing achievements.

One of the project's aims is to pass on – with the direct participation of the involved students – the newly acquired expert knowledge to the region's public sphere and the educational space of primary and secondary schools in the Liberec region. Tangible outputs include the outdoor panel exhibition *Returning Home: Liberec's Holocaust Victims*, which had a preview in 2023, as well as public lectures and workshops. The scholars also prepared guided walking tours around Liberec's monuments for senior citizens. Students also participated in themed excursions (e.g. to the Terežín Memorial) with primary and secondary school pupils. The laying of *Stolpersteine* in partnership with the Liberec Jewish Community was another integral part of the project, alongside the organization of various other acts of remembrance.

One of the main aims of the *Returning Home* project was to halt and reverse, at least symbolically, the Nazis' process of dehumanizing Holocaust victims and erasing any memories of them, and thus to reinstate the names and life stories of those who did not survive. In this context, citizenship of the city was symbolically restored to those murdered by conferring it to their descendants, who travelled to Liberec from all over the world. This ceremony and other moments during the visit of survivors to Liberec were documented by Czech Television on 28 February 2025.¹

The book's introduction expresses a plea aimed at the reading public for a certain leniency regarding the fact that, for most of the authors, it is their first published work. This fear, I feel, is unfounded – for in my opinion the book is a unique achievement, a touching and beautiful work (if such a thing can be said given the subject matter) that unequivocally merits the attention of readers across various categories. One can hope that *Returning Home* will be followed by subsequent projects, as research like this is an important element of remembrance culture. And at least on a symbolic level, it enables the citizens of Liberec who were disenfranchised, driven into exile, or murdered to return home.

Liberec

Zuzana Cilerová

¹ Available online; URL: <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/11690334848-souseded/425236100111002/> (from approx. 14 min.)(last access: 13.10.2025).