

*A Secret Garden: Roudnice, Czech Republic  
August 9, 1995*



*Written by: Michael Witkin*

Michael Witkin has been commissioned as the architect to design the new facilities for Congregation Beth Am. The proposed design consists of a Sanctuary, Social Hall, Jewish Learning Center and Administration Offices, which all focus onto a Remembrance Courtyard. Upon arrival, the members of the congregation will walk through this courtyard, which will consist of an orchard of orange trees, running water features and a replica of the facade of the Roudnice Ritual Hall, connecting us to the past.



In order to recreate this facade, it was necessary for Michael to visit Roudnice, Czech Republic, to gather information including architectural measurements and photographs. This is his story.

Broken stars of David lie strewn amongst the bones of our ancestors. Moss covered tombstones ripped and aborted from the wet black mother earth weep in their desecration, silent and haunting:



This secret garden within a veil of trees protecting itself from the reality which surrounds it; so discreet that one could never know the treasure that lies within the mirage of trees sprung up in the middle of deserted fields of sunflowers.

There the spirits hold hands and dance to peace. The only peace they may have ever known. Death.

I looked down at the only picture known to exist and given to me by the Jewish Museum of Prague. This was the place, yet I would have never known it's glory as it stands now. I was not sure of my emotions and the rain suddenly felt like a million tear drops beating down on me chilling my bones.



I touched the bricks that made up what was left of a wall and continued down the narrow path leading through the cemetery. The sun peaked through barely reaching into the depth of this overgrown and neglected place of reverence.

Blankets of trees so deep and thick intertwined one another shielding broken tombs and protecting tightly what yet remained. God has not abandoned these souls.



The silence was deafening as I reached down and touched a small granite tombstone, feeling the words, Hanna Richter, 1871 - 1872. A child. Merely a child who had now stilled her dancing to watch my every move. A haunting hush enveloped me as I brushed the leaves away from yet another grave robbed of its dignity. There lies Abraham, Solomon, Sorrel, Rivka and Sheina. The walls that once corralled these beautiful souls had been invaded by war and persecution. Denial has left our history here to dissolve into the ground and bury itself forever.



I knew at that point that my work there had a far greater meaning for me than what I intended when I set out on this journey. I turned around and made my way back to the Ritual Hall to begin my mission.

The rain was fierce and with a new purpose, I set out to find a cover of some sort that I could work under and keep myself dry. In hopes of finding plastic, I drove into the town of Roudnice.

Roudnice is a small town with architectural influences dating as far back as the Thirteenth Century and affected greatly by a fascist government. Set free only five years ago and left to their own devices of survival, the people of this farming community live a very simple life. They have been hardened through the ages of oppression and harbor deep sorrow within themselves. I felt sad for their misfortune and guilty that I myself had escaped their anguish through luck of time.



After an hour of searching for plastic, frustrated with my language barrier, I happened upon a grocery store and bought all of their plastic grocery bags that resembled souvenir bags from Tahiti, complete with palm trees. Although they did not understand my request, they were all too eager to watch as I began cutting the bags into pieces on their floor and tape them together. For them, this was probably the most out-of-the-ordinary experience they've encountered since the day they were set free. They all watched intently as I completed my task, thanked them and made my way back to the cemetery just outside the town.

The sky had closed in on me with a dark gray haze, and the rain had not let up. It seemed that something was trying to discourage me from disturbing this place that had for once found rest. Yet, I felt an even stronger draw to go on.



When I returned, I began setting up my equipment, cutting down the vegetation and trees that had filled the entrance and clearing out the space where I was to work. After about an hour of preparation I began the process of making a silicon mold of a column capital, which was a beautiful design incorporating sea shells and intricate detail.



I was well into my work for about 5 hours, when an elderly man entered with his dog. While I insisted that I could not speak Czech, and handed him a letter written in Czech by the Jewish Museum explaining my work, he proceeded to tell me his memories of this place as a young boy. All I could do was to look at him weeping as I showed him the picture of this Ritual Hall in it's time. He cried "Primo, Primo!" That touched me. For him, I believe, a bit of his past had been resurrected.



I wrote a sign in Czech that said, "Please do not touch, Museum of Prague Architect" and hung it on my plastic bag tarp, packed up and called it a day. I had worked for nine hours straight, without even realizing how exhausted I was, not to mention muddy, wet and cold.

I drove 50 kilometers back to Prague, washed my clothes in the tub, hung them to dry by the stove, and collapsed only to do the same again the next day.



The second day I was up early and was on the road by 7:00 AM, after stocking up at the bakery for my breakfast, lunch and dinner... bread and cheese. I arrived at the site around 8 AM with angst in hopes that my work had gone untouched. It was just as I left it! I began the second layer of silicon and after a few hours left it to dry.



The roof of the Ritual Hall had been set on fire years ago and collapsed only to root itself in three feet of mud and dense undergrowth. My curiosity drove me to see what life was like under that rubble. I chipped away at the mud and grass with a piece of slate that had fallen from the roof and discovered just what I was looking for. An exquisite tile floor, still intact, hidden for years.

Soon, I had another visitor. He watched my madness as inspiration drove me to my hands and knees in the mud, unveiling this beautiful floor with only a piece of slate. He began speaking in Czech and I nodded to appease him. I did not want another interruption. I had many. He left me and I continued - I could not help my excitement.



Within an hour I had unmasked a substantial portion of the tile floor, just as the police arrived. This interruption definitely warranted my attention. As they read my letter from the Prague Museum, they nodded and waved me on.

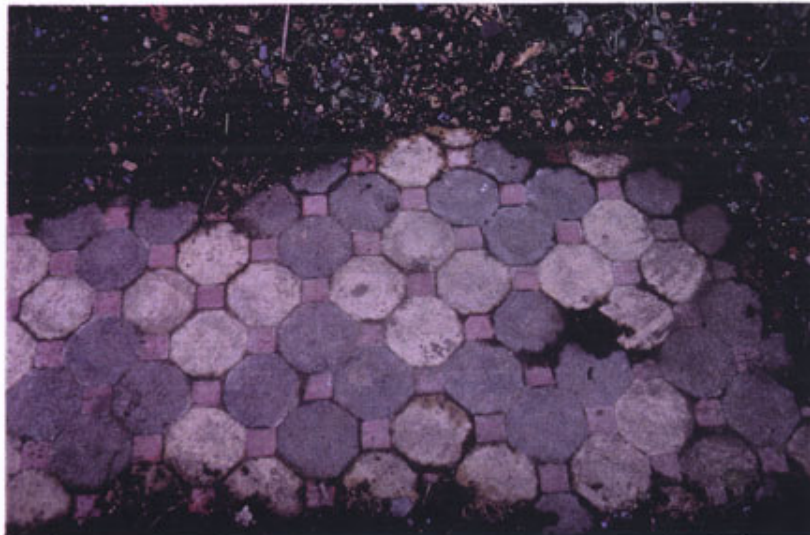
Throughout the history of this holy place, it had been denied its existence and left abandoned. But on this day, rain pouring down on me, polyurethane in my hair and mud caked under my fingernails, this place was being redeemed.



I drove back to my apartment in Prague, hoping that the mold would work, and reflecting on my experiences the last few days. It was late and the next day would be the last. I would go back early and pull the hardened mold off the column. I hoped the rain would wash the exposed floor, so I might see the colors more vividly. It would be a very busy day. Besides completing the mold, I needed to measure-up the entire facade and take color slides, in order to better understand the architectural details.



On that last day, I was off to an early start. Bundled up and headed out of Prague. I arrived in Roudnice around 8:00 AM. Just as I had hoped, the rain had washed the floor clean. Now I was anxious to try the mold. It certainly was solid. I pulled it once and off it came, with very little effort. It had worked. In that instant, as I held the mold inspectively in my grasp, I heard a bird chirp. The first sound I had heard in three days. Within minutes the sky opened up and the sun beamed down on me and dried the tile floor. My heart filled with satisfaction for having accomplished what I had set out to do, and a much deeper happiness for the souls that had been resurrected. I felt overwhelmed with approval from those who had been watching me. I thanked God for this privilege of helping the spirit of this secret garden be known, respected and finally at peace.







The irony of it all was that the residents of Roudnice are a very solemn people. They have had a hard life and suffering has encased them. Denial has become a part of them through guilt. Guilt for taking part in persecution or just not being able to change it. I'm not sure. The Ritual Hall, a symbol of a victim, Stars of David broken in half, graves turned upside down, dilapidated walls overgrown with foliage. A place where the souls had sought peace, but never found it.

There are many similarities in the living spirits of Roudnice and those spirits not living, and through the respect given to this Ritual Hall, it was brought back to life if only for these three days.

This resurrection touched the people of Roudnice, and those who sought it felt connected to its joy. And so, through death they were given life.

As I packed my car and set out for my final journey home, I stopped for one last look at the words inscribed in Hebrew over the entry. They spoke out to me - *"Our bodies may be hurt, but our souls will live on forever."*

How true those words are.