

Paintings Documenting the *Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim* (The Holy Brotherhood of Those Who Perform Charitable Deeds) of Prague

Introduction

The Prague Burial Society, formally called the *Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim*, was established in 1564, and the Holy Society of Benevolent Women, caring for deceased women, was formally acknowledged in 1692. With over 10,000 Jews, Prague had the largest Jewish population of any European city at the end of the 17th century.

Fifteen of these paintings were created about 1772, with an additional four produced some years later. The paintings are of actual people living at that time, and show the spectrum of functions undertaken by the Burial Society, from visiting the sick, through the cycle of prayers, preparation of the body, memorialization and burial of the deceased, to comforting the mourners. According to the Talmud, no person may profit from the death of another, so all the profits and donations raised by the Society's work went for the good of the Jewish community, including a hospital and orphanage, contributions to Talmudic schools, support for the poor, and overseeing the cemeteries. The iconic cemetery depicted in the original series served the Jewish community of Prague for three centuries beginning in the 1400s. Due to lack of space, soil was added according to Jewish law, so that there are layers upon layers of people buried, creating a mound. As each layer was added, the old headstones were removed and placed on top along with the new ones, giving the cemetery its unusual number of *matzevot* (tombstones) close to one another.

At the time the paintings were created, the influences of both Christian authorities and the growing popularity of the Enlightenment among Jews had brought criticism of traditional Jewish burial practices. These paintings show that even in the short time between death and burial, each deceased is treated with great dignity, and attention is given to many details that express long-standing values of the Jewish community. As the expression of feelings in the paintings attest, these traditions were not just rote exercises. The paintings were created to honor those volunteers who held the prestige and respect of being part of the Burial Society, to educate those questioning the value of the traditional ways as well as potential future members and recipients of the services of the *Chevrah*.

The paintings depict death as part of the cycle of life, and provide an invaluable window into the traditions of the time, traditions that are once again increasing in acceptance as we seek meaning, community, and care at the end of life.

The introduction is based on information from "Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe," by Richard I. Cohen, and "The Cycle of Paintings of the Prague Burial Society," from the Jewish Museum in Prague.



1 Visiting the Sick Man

Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/1



The first painting in the series is a tribute to an esteemed physician of the Prague Jewish community. His presence and the bottle he holds may depict the Society's respect for science and medicine.

2 Prayers at the Deathbed

Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/2



The *Chevra Kadisha* prays with the *goses* (dying man), perhaps the final *vidui* (prayer of forgiveness). Including the *goses*, there are ten men — a *minyan*. It is a *mitzvah*

(holy deed or commandment) to be present with someone at the moment of death.

3 Taking Custody of the Dead Man

Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/3



The deceased has been covered with a sheet and moved to the floor according to custom, perhaps with his feet pointing toward Jerusalem. The man at the table may be

a *shomer* (guard or companion) of the deceased, reading Psalms to comfort his *neshamah* (soul).

4 Making the Shroud Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/4



The number and type of *tachrichim* (burial garments) vary from place to place. They are meant to be like the garments worn by the High Priest on Yom Kippur in the Temple in Jerusalem, for the one who died needs to be

adorned in such a way as to be prepared to meet the Holy One.

5 Making the Coffin Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/11



The *aron* (coffin) was (and still is), by tradition, very simple, to demonstrate the equality of all persons in death. The depiction of this task in the series of paintings

suggests that each coffin was made for the given individual.

6 Digging the Grave Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/7



According to *halachah* (Jewish law), a grave must be dug at least two cubits deep (a cubit being a measure of the forearm from the tip of the middle finger to the bottom of the elbow).

7 Carrying out the Body Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/6



The body of the deceased is taken to the cemetery. The *tzedakah* (charity) box is a central feature in the painting, showing the value of giving charity in honor of the one

who has died. As in several other pictures, there is weeping.

8 Washing of the Body Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/5



The body of the deceased is washed with reverence as the liturgy is recited in preparation for the *taharah* (purification through pouring water over the body). The *Vaya'an Vayomer* prayer is visible on the wall, reminding

the Chevrah Kadisha to show the *meit* (deceased) the same dignity that God's angels showed to Joshua in preparing him to be *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest).

10 The Oration over the Dead Man Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/9



The Orator may be giving the *hesped* (eulogy) and chanting *El Malei Rachamim* (God Full of Compassion), a central prayer in the liturgy releasing the *neshamah* into the arms of God.

9 The Entrance of the Burial Procession into the Cemetery Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/8



It is customary to stop seven times on the way to the grave, each stop causing the individuals in the procession to reflect on death and its teaching on how to live.

11 Carrying the Body to the Grave Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/10



As in other paintings we see the *tzedakah* box. An older man is being supported by two younger men.

- 12** Lowering the Coffin into the Grave
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/12



The absence of women mourners in the cemetery is notable. We see the *tallit* (prayer shawl) of the deceased covering his shroud.

- 13** Consoling the Relatives of the Dead
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/13



The work of the Chevrah Kadisha does not end with the burial of the deceased, but includes the *mitzvah* of *nichum aveilim* (consoling the mourners) as well as helping the family financially if the deceased had been the breadwinner.

- 14** Washing Hands upon Leaving the Cemetery
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/14



This is a custom of spiritual purification that continues into the present day. Note the date above the pump handle – 1607.

- 15** Burial Society Board Members
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/15



As mentioned before, these paintings are based on actual communities. This is the final painting of the original series. The varied styles of their hats, clothing, shoes, and beards may indicate their origins in different Jewish

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16 Annual Prayer at the Grave of Rabbi Loew
Prague ca 1835, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/16



This painting and the next are dated from about 1835. This one depicts a visit to the grave of Rabbi Judah Loew, known as the *Maharal*. Loew was a Talmudic scholar, mystic, and philosopher, and a leading rabbi of Bohemia

until his death in the early 1600s. He figures in the story of the Golem, a legendary man-like creature made from clay.

17 Annual Banquet of the Burial Society
Prague ca 1835, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/17



This banquet may have been on *Zayin Adar* (7th day of the month of Adar), which is traditionally the day of Moses's birth and death. Chevrah Kadisha groups would gather on this date (and still do) to honor their members

and their work. The paintings on the walls are the earlier series of fifteen. It was common at that time for guilds and charitable institutions to display such depictions of their work in their halls.

18 The Jewish Cemetery in Prague-Olšany
Prague ca 1840, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/18



In the 17th century it was considered unhygienic to bury the corpses of plague victims within city limits, so a large cemetery was designated in 1680 for this very purpose. The Jewish Cemetery was part of this large cemetery

complex. When plague struck again a century later, Emperor Joseph II enacted a series of hygiene reforms and Olšany became the city's official cemetery.

<http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/olsany-cemetery>

19 The Entrance to the Jewish Cemetery in Prague-Olšany
Prague ca 1840, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/19



Painted in about 1840, some 70 years after the original series, these depictions are of the new Jewish Cemetery, opened in the late 1700s.