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 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.

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).

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

Taking Custody of the Dead Man
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/3

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.

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

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

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.

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 meir (deceased) the same dignity that God's angels showed to Joshua in preparing him to be Kohen Gadol (High Priest).

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

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.

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**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 people. The varied styles of their hats, clothing, shoes, and beards may indicate their origins in different Jewish communities. This is the final painting of the original series.
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

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.

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