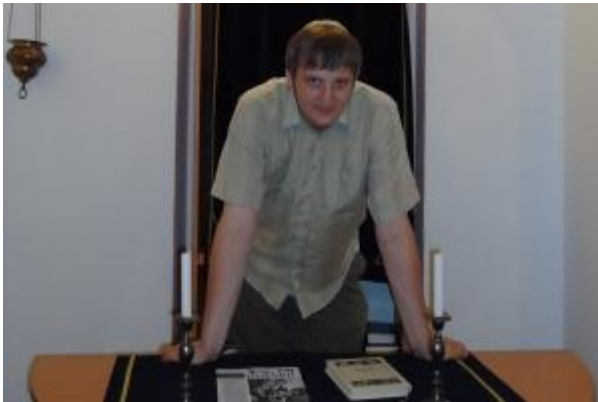


In Prague, balancing Muslim-Jewish ties with shul leadership

By Symi Rom-Rymer · April 15, 2011



Karel Goldmann has raised eyebrows in his Prague synagogue for his outspoken advocacy for greater Muslim-Jewish ties. (Symi Rom-Rymer)

PRAGUE (JTA) -- On a cold December evening in 2009, 26-year-old Karel Goldmann faced an uphill battle and he knew it.

He had just proposed to his fellow synagogue board members a low-key, meet-and-greet between the members of Bejt Simcha, one of Prague's progressive synagogues, and Emir Omič, the imam of Prague. Goldmann's idea was to give members of his community a chance to learn about Islam from a Muslim leader.

"I wanted to have Imam Omič over for tea and have him speak about Islam and its similarities with Judaism," Goldmann told JTA. "I wanted members of Bejt Simcha to know that not all Muslims are terrorists."

But when the matter came to a vote, there was only one voice on the seven-member board in favor of the proposal: Goldmann's.

Self-effacing and with an easy laugh, Goldmann does not seem the controversial type. Yet he has become one of the Jewish community of Prague's most outspoken grassroots advocates of Jewish-Muslim dialogue at a time when such ideas are unpopular among many Czech Jews. In the Czech Republic, where the small Jewish community is apprehensive of Muslim-Jewish interaction, interfaith activities like those Goldmann supports are viewed with skepticism.

“I want to be on good terms with Muslims, but can they claim the same?” asks Ivan Kohout, Bejt Simcha’s cantor. “Islamic fundamentalism is growing, and I have reservations about such dialogue.”

It’s not too hard to find Jewish-Muslim dialogue in the United States, from national programs to events at individual synagogues. But in the Czech Republic, the little formal Jewish-Muslim interaction that exists is limited to top religious leaders.

As with other communities in Europe, Jews in this community of 3,000 to 4,000 people are mostly wary of Muslims. Muslims have been linked to anti-Semitic incidents on the continent, and many Europeans view Muslims as threatening the European way of life.

But not Goldmann.

He blogs for Idnes, the Czech Republic’s second-largest newspaper, about how prejudice and xenophobia plague both Jews and Muslims. He contributes to a magazine called Secrets of Islam. He writes articles in his synagogue’s magazine about similarities between Judaism and Islam and the insidiousness of anti-Islamic rhetoric.

Even in his progressive congregation, it’s often a tough balance between being an advocate for Muslim-Jewish ties and a synagogue leader.

Goldmann said his rabbi recently pulled him aside and said, “Karel, I know you and your articles are interesting, but I do hope you are not in touch with extremists.”

“Sometimes my opinions about Muslims are really different from the community,” Goldmann says with characteristic understatement. “I question everything. I don’t like firm opinions. If you can’t change your opinions, you are ideological but it doesn’t mean you are right.”

He adds, “Almost everyone looks at me like I’m lost.”

Goldmann’s outspokenness on Muslim-Jewish issues is the culmination of a pair of personal journeys that began when he learned of his Jewish roots at the age of 18.

Judaism played almost no role in the Goldmann family’s identity. Goldmann’s grandfather, an assimilated Jew with German roots, abandoned his family and fled to Germany after the Communist coup in 1948. Those he left behind suppressed any connection to Judaism. As the Iron Curtain came down, Czechoslovak Jews won the freedom to practice their religion. But the history of assimilation and Community repression had made its mark.

Although occasionally teased about his Jewish-sounding name at school, at no point during Goldmann’s childhood did his family ever talk to him about his Jewish roots.

He only learned of them in his late teens when his father mentioned it in a conversation about religion, in which Goldmann had developed an interest. Goldmann soon embarked on a quest to discover what being Jewish meant. He turned to

Orthodox Judaism, the denomination of the official Jewish community here, but found it too restrictive. Although he eventually underwent an Orthodox conversion so that he could participate fully in religious services – Goldmann’s mother is not Jewish -- Goldmann found his true home among progressive Jews.

Then came his political awakening. In the early 2000s, Goldmann enrolled as a student at Charles University in Prague, intending to study Judaism.

But because there was no separate Jewish studies program, Goldmann was placed in classes with students studying other religions, including Islam.

“Before I started university, I thought that Muslims were trying to convert us to Islam or were going to make a jihad on the Czech Republic,” Goldmann said.

The experience of getting to know Muslims personally helped him overcome deep-seated prejudices about them. After graduating, Goldmann began blogging for Idnes about Jewish-Muslim issues, and he soon came to the attention of Lukáš Lhot’an, an editor of the magazine Secrets of Islam.

“He not only mentioned Jewish problems, but also problems that Muslims face,” Lhot’an remarked. “I thought that he wrote objectively.”

The two became good friends, and Goldmann became a contributor to Secrets of Islam.

Although other Jews don’t share his predilections, Goldmann believes that his friendship with Lhot’an and other Muslims helps the Jewish community. “When I talk with the Muslim community in the Czech Republic, it makes our image better,” he said.

When it comes to Israel-related issues, Goldmann recognizes there are differences between the two communities, but he says part of that is public posturing. Over a beer at the pub, his Muslim friends aren’t as dogmatic as in public. The only way to change things, he says, is to push for greater friendships between Muslims and Jews.

“It’s important to have a personal connection,” Goldmann said. “We need to discuss the Middle East conflict face to face, to keep talking about it and not repeat nonsense.”

Meanwhile, Goldmann has become a leader in his synagogue, involved in fundraising and other inter-communal outreach programs.

There have been times, especially during the past year, when he thought he might have to shelve his interfaith work so as not to do damage to Bejt Simcha, which is trying to grow.

But ultimately, Goldmann says, he can no more hide his frustration at the growing anti-Muslim rhetoric in the Czech Republic than he can deny his Jewish identity. Now, more than ever, he must speak up, he says.

“Now is the time to not step back and make room for anti-Islamic rhetoric,” he says. “I am trying to discuss these topics with people, to contribute to the change. What else can I do?”