

## VIRTUALLY JEWISH

What happens to Jewish culture when the Jews depart? Why is there a boom in Jewish museum formations in town and cities where there are hardly any Jews? Who are these museums for? Why do some non-Jews become philo-Semites? What difference has the crumbling of the Iron Curtain made to the revival of Jewish identity? Answers to these questions are attempted in a thought-provoking volume by Ruth Ellen Gruber who has already spent decades in examining what was left over by the Holocaust in Central Europe. Scholarly analysis is enlivened by verbatim quotes from her many encounters with a wide range of characters.

In countries like Czechoslovakia, Poland and Lithuania there is an interest in Jewish culture quite out of proportion with

the tiny numbers of resident Jews. The driving forces behind this phenomenon include government and foreign (usually EU or Jewish-American) assistance, the return of Holocaust survivors and local entrepreneurship as well as guilty-conscience over the loss of part of national culture.

Gruber also turns her incisive eye on the origins and current position of klezmer in Europe and America. She notes that in the hands of Giora Feidman - one of the pioneers of the revival - this music "became a catalyst for reconciliation between Germans and Jews" and "a broader symbol of expressing opposition to xenophobia and racism in general".

Many questions remain unanswered: will "virtual" Jewish culture bring back overt anti-Semitism? Will the revival remain benign and will it last? Perhaps these



Lifesize cut-out figures from photographs of pre-War Jews in Krakow's restored Izaak Synagogue

will be answered in Gruber's next book. Ruth Gruber has already published a book on the tourist component of the topic: *Jewish Heritage Travel 1999*.

■ Peter Falush

*Virtually Jewish - Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* Ruth Ellen Gruber (2001) University of California Press £24.95

## CHALLENGES TO IDENTITY

IRENE WISE reviews two books in which Vera Gissing draws on her *kindertransport* experiences

"I didn't cry. I only shed pearls..." So Vera Diamant spoke of her first separation from her parents. Days before her 11th birthday, she and her sister Eva were sent on the kindertransport to England. *Pearls of Childhood* is Vera's account of the years of "exile".

Narrative is interspersed with diary entries and excerpts from letters, providing an objective overview of the acute observations of childhood and adolescence. Vera was convinced that one day she would be reunited with her parents. The rollercoaster of almost tangible emotions makes *Pearls of Childhood* an endearing and engaging memoir.

Vera returned to her homeland in 1945 but rife anti-Semitism persuaded her to return to England. She revisits Prague in 1968, when her search for identity finally comes to a close. She is able to accept, after all, that she was: "Jewish by race, Czech by birth, and British by choice." Many survivors and refugees will identify with Vera's feelings of confusion and will empathise with her inner contentment at finding her true self.

Vera has now co-authored a book about the man who organized her rescue. In *Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation* Muriel Emanuel describes Winton's early life and background, while Vera details the rescue mission and Winton's life post retirement.

Although he and his father had been baptised, Winton's roots were Jewish. He himself is not able to say whether this background influenced the extraordinary efforts he put into achieving the rescue of 669 children who eventually left Czechoslovakia on eight transports. For each child he had to find a family and a guarantor for £50 - a large sum in 1938. It was mainly Christian families of modest means who came to his aid. Some children were converted and their stories are amongst the individual histories traced in this book. Extraordinarily Winton did not speak of the rescue for decades. He regarded it as a minor part of his life and did not even tell his wife until papers were discovered in 1988. Genuinely modest, he is fazed by the attention it has now brought him. Vera did not know of his existence until

1988, when she was introduced to him on the Esther Rantzen show. "Suddenly he was bombarded with a huge, extensive family."

The revelation also had a profound impact on some of the rescued; for them, and indeed for Winton himself, being reminded of their Jewish origins was not always comfortable. It is such insight into how individuals cope with a challenge to long-established identity that is one of the most revealing aspects of this book. It also provides a heartening reminder that one individual with no particularly remarkable qualities, other than a strong humanitarianism, can make such a difference. This is a message that Vera Gissing is keen to communicate in the Holocaust education programmes to which she now devotes much of her time. ■

*Pearls of Childhood* by Vera Gissing (1988) Robson Books, £8.99.

*Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation* by Muriel Emanuel and Vera Gissing (2001) Vallentine Mitchell, £11.99