THE Thirty Years War was the most destructive war in European history before the twentieth century, with military fatalities dramatically multiplied by the effects of famine and disease on the civilian population of Central Europe. The war began in Prague with the famous defenestration of 1618, when Habsburg officials were thrown out of a high window in the Prague Castle. In To Tell Their Children: Jewish communal memory in early modern Prague, Rachel L. Greenblatt looks at the war in an entirely new way, as she demonstrates that the Prague Jewish community was particularly focused on telling its own history in relation to the events of the Thirty Years War.

The Jewish community of early modern Prague is associated with the legend of the Golem, a monster supposedly created by Rabbi Judah Loew to defend the city’s Jews in the late sixteenth century. Greenblatt explores how the advent of war in the early seventeenth century led to the composition of unusual recitations, at once historical and liturgical, that were creatively interwoven with the Jewish calendar of synagogue observances to commemorate the escape of the Jewish community from the depredations of pillaging soldiers or Christian civilians. There was already a model from the fourteenth century: the Hebrew penitential prayers (selihah, plural selihot) composed to commemorate the massacre of 3,000 Prague Jews in 1389 at Eastertime. In the age of the Thirty Years War, new occasions for liturgical commemoration occurred: most importantly, in 1620, when the Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand II defeated the rebellious Bohemian estates at the battle of the White Mountain, avenging the defenestration and restoring Habsburg rule in Bohemia.

Prague Jews were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the Habsburgs after the White Mountain, all the more so since the Jewish community had certainly collaborated to some extent with the Winter King, Frederick of the Palatinate, who occupied the Bohemian throne from 1619 until 1620. The Jewish celebration of Habsburg victory was a vindication of Jewish loyalty and an expression of relief that the community itself had not suffered too grievously in the wartime circumstances. The selihot composed after 1620 were inserted into the Jewish liturgical calendar of lunar months on the date of 14 Heshvan. The recitation allusively referenced the escape from enemies that was also commemorated at Passover and Purim, to the extent that 14 Heshvan even came to be known as the “Prager Purim”.

“History was not a realm removed from ritual but integral to it”, Greenblatt writes, implicitly taking issue with some of the conventions of Jewish studies. “Secular history was invoked in ritual time in the sacred synagogue space.” Furthermore, that secular history was not the isolated history of the Jewish community, but encompassed the broader history of the Habsburg monarchy in the seventeenth century.

As if such a specific communal “Purim” were not unusual enough, the Prague Jews who lived through the Thirty Years War also created a particular type of family scroll (megillah) to celebrate their personal escapes from the enemies of the Jews. The titanic Bohemian military figure, Albrecht von Wallenstein, Emperor Ferdinand’s most successful general, worked closely with the Jewish financier Jacob Bassevi, but Wallenstein turned against particular Jews of the community in the matter of some silk curtains stolen from the Liechtenstein family palace in Prague. In an episode that did not find its way into Friedrich Schiller’s magnificent Wallenstein trilogy of dramas, two Jews, Hanokh Altschul and Joseph Tein, were nearly put to death by the Habsburg commander over the stolen curtains and finally ransomed by payments from the Jewish community. Each of the redeemed Jews composed a family megillah – called the Megillah of the Curtains – modelled on the Book of Esther, so that later generations of the family might liturgically celebrate their lucky ancestor’s escape from death.

Greenblatt also explores other forms of commemoration: from the Prague cemetery where “baroque” style could be seen in some of the stones of the seventeenth century, to Yiddish songs like the “Shvedish Lid” (Swedish song) that described the Swedish assault on Prague that marked the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648. Her book is handsomely illustrated with excellent black-and-white reproductions of title pages, gravestones and Hebrew texts. Recent scholarship has taken the study of religion in Central and Eastern Europe to new levels of sophistication, and Greenblatt’s fascinating study may be read with great interest alongside Howard Louthan’s Converting Bohemia (2009), which addresses seventeenth-century Bohemia from the Roman Catholic perspective, and David Frick’s Kith, Kin, and Neighbors (2013), which explores the intersecting religious communities of seventeenth-century Vilnius. To Tell Their Children offers unusual insights into how Jewish communal memory related to the events of Habsburg history and the Thirty Years War, while analysing the dynamics of Jewish historical remembrance.