

**PRESS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**The Jewish Museum in Prague retrieves a 1901 Torah mantle**

*Prague, 28 May 2015* - Last year the Jewish Museum in Prague (JMP) managed to ensure the successful restitution and repatriation to Prague of a Torah curtain – originally from the South Bohemian town of Mladá Vožice – which was identified by JMP experts in a Sotheby's New York sale in April 2013. Since then, the JMP has managed to trace another object that earlier disappeared from its collections – specifically, a Torah mantle from 1901, which came to the JMP in a shipment of ritual objects from the Jewish religious community of Holešov during the Second World War.

The Torah mantle in question is made of red velvet and cream silk atlas, is adorned with paillettes and embellished with embroidery in gold metal thread. The dedicatory inscription bears the names Hindl and Hayyim Beer, who donated the mantle to a synagogue in or near Holešov in 1901. This item was identified as being offered for sale by the Kedem Auction House in Jerusalem in January of this year. As is customary in such cases, the Jewish Museum in Prague immediately asked the auction house to withdraw the item from sale while providing historical documents that prove its provenance and outline what may have happened to it: either it was taken out of the museum's collections under unclear yet undoubtedly illegal circumstances after the war, or – more likely – it was illegally taken out of the former Czechoslovakia from one of the Jewish communities that had borrowed ritual objects from the Jewish Museum after the war. The person selling the item was informed of the museum's claim by the auction house and, on the basis of personal negotiations, finally agreed to return the item to its rightful place at the Jewish Museum, from where it had been missing for decades.

It is not exactly known when and how the mantle got to Israel. According to the memoirs of the Israeli collector Dani Schlesinger – a scion of a well-known family of Viennese publishers – who is in possession of the mantle, it has been possible to trace the fate of the mantle only to a limited extent. Its theft and illegal export probably occurred at the end of the 1940s or the start of the 1950s. This rather small inconspicuous textile, which was not likely to have attracted much attention at the time, later turned up in one of the warehouses where so called “non-restitutable” objects of Judaica were kept. After the war, these objects were sent from Europe to Israel and to the North American continent, which at the time had the largest active Jewish congregations and was the destination of large numbers of Jewish refugees from Europe. Dani Schlesinger later acquired the mantle from this source and for many years kept it in a frame on his study wall as a curio of unknown origin.

The preservation and development of the collections at the Jewish Museum in Prague is an absolute exception in the context of the devastation of the Jewish culture in the Shoah and the Second World War. Elsewhere in Europe, the vast majority of Judaica from the property of decimated Jewish communities, associations and educational/cultural institutions became targets of mass looting, after which their provenance history was almost completely lost. In

Prague, however, the representatives of the local Jewish community – in collaboration with art history and Jewish studies experts – managed to save most of the movable assets of the disbanded Jewish communities, congregations and associations in what was then the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia by having them shipped to the Jewish Museum in Prague and gradually incorporated into its collections.

Although the entire project of the so-called “Central Jewish Museum” was under the strict supervision of the SS-Central Office for the Settlement of the Jewish Question and was tolerated by the Nazi authorities solely for material and propaganda reasons, it very quickly became an effective rescue mission as conceived by the community staff and, above all, by the members of the museum's curatorial team. It is thanks to the efforts of these people – most of whom did not manage to survive – that a central collecting point was already set up during the war, similar to the ones that were later established by the Allies in the occupied zones of Germany immediately after the war. Unlike many of the European objects of Judaica that were collected, for example, in the Offenbach Archival Depot (one of the central collecting points for the temporary storage of cultural objects that had been looted by the Nazis and subsequently recovered by the Allies), however, tens of thousands of Bohemian and Moravian Judaica that had been saved during the war at the Central Jewish Museum in Prague were precisely documented and catalogued – their provenance was known and, due to the systematic nature of the wartime shipments of these objects, they in fact never ceased to be part of the organic wholes to which they naturally belonged.

The Council of Jewish Religious Communities – later renamed the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic – became the legal successor of the disbanded Jewish communities, congregations and associations. In the first post-war years (1945–1948), this body provided objects of Judaica on loan to Jewish religious communities that had been re-established after the war. A number of these communities, however, later disbanded again, and most of the ritual objects that had been loaned were not returned to the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague. This has led to the present situation where objects of Judaica are now appearing for sale on the art market, mostly devoid of context and provenance history. These objects provide unique evidence of the existence of the once-flourishing Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia that were decimated during the Shoah. In connection with the increasing number of attempts at dealing in these objects, anyone who owns or is considering to purchase a piece of Judaica from Bohemia or Moravia, or who is to receive such an item as a gift or bequest, will be provided with a free consultation by the Jewish Museum in Prague, which will check to see whether or not the item in question comes from its collection.

The Jewish Museum in Prague greatly appreciates the kind and generous support it has received from the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem and the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Tel Aviv in bringing the Torah mantle back to the Czech Republic.

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