

NEWSLETTER 1996/2

The New Exhibition in the Klaus Synagogue

The reconstruction of the baroque Klaus Synagogue, which was originally built in 1694, was successfully completed in March 1996. During building work some of the original platform (bimah) and paving stones were uncovered and these have now been conserved and incorporated in the exhibition area. On the 29th of April the Museum held a ceremonial opening in the synagogue of the permanent exhibition Jewish Traditions and Customs, which concentrates on the synagogue and religious festivals. The exhibition provides the visitor with an insight into the nature of the oldest monotheistic religion and an outline of its origins. In other sections of the exhibition visitors can learn about the role of the synagogue in Jewish religious and communal life and of the meaning and historical context of individual festivals, amongst them the special position of Saturday as one of the key elements of Jewish tradition. Individual festivals form a thematic whole in the exhibition, enhanced by books of liturgy, religious objects, old engravings and pictures and full explanatory texts. The exhibits are of unique historical and artistic value, ranging from the small silver shields used for the Torah in the 18th and 19th centuries to the Torah pointer combined with a spice box from the second half of the 18th century. Other rarities include the Torah curtains from the 17th and 18th centuries, of which the curtain from 1695 is of particular value. This was donated by the renowned collector of Hebrew books and manuscripts, David Oppenheim. All objects exhibited are from the collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague, one part being original elements of the Klaus Synagogue, the other assembled from various synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia.

The Catalogue of Jewish Communities

In 1995 the Jewish Museum began work on the long-term project provisionally entitled The Catalogue of Jewish Communities. Its purpose is gradually to compile all available information concerning the history and monuments of individual religious communities and prayer groups which previously existed on the territory of the present Czech Republic. The aim is to employ a uniform method of recording the following information on every community from more than 600 localities: the oldest references to Jewish settlement, the results of every census of the Jews, professions through the ages, the use of family names, the development of religious communities (including their bodies and institutions, names of rabbis, cantors and other functionaries), a survey of other important figures of the community, the development and extent of the Jewish district, the Nazi period and where relevant the destruction of the Jewish settlement, the history and description of individual synagogues and prayer houses, other important buildings, the history and development of individual graveyards, collection items from a given community stored either in the Jewish Museum or in other domestic or foreign collections, records kept in the Jewish Museum and in other archives and museums, iconography pertaining to the history and topography of the communities, literature and sources (including bibliographic articles).

An important element of the program, for whose completion Jiří Fiedler is responsible, is the establishing of the fullest possible alphabetical register of the communities names, which will enable users to find each locality with the minimum of searching.

From the Exhibits in the Maisel Synagogue

The permanent exhibition based in the Maisel Synagogue, which is dedicated to the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from the 10th to the 18th century, also counts among its exhibits the banner of Solomon Molcho. How the banner, together with the ceremonial robe of the cabbalist and false messiah (born c. 1500 in Lisbon) found its way to Prague and finally to the Jewish Museum has still not been fully explained. What is certain is that the relics (Solomon Molcho having been burnt at the stake in Ratisbon in 1532) were safeguarded by the Horowitz family in the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague. The banner, embroidered on both sides with selected verses from the Psalms, is in an extremely fragile condition and this, as well as its rarity, prevents its being exhibited in the original. It was therefore necessary to create a copy. At first an exact replica was considered, using an identical technique as the original, but the costs involved would have been unacceptably high. The Museum therefore turned to the renowned restorer and textile artist V. Šolcová, who proposed producing a copy of the banner by means of a photocopy. Preliminary tests showed that this method could preserve even the finest details of the original banner including the embroidered letters. The photocopies were carried out using colour photography, enlarged to the corresponding size and then ironed onto a cotton fabric (cambric). The separate parts of the banner were sewn together with a silk, neutrally coloured crepe line, the embroidered letters being colour-enhanced. On the ruby coloured edges of the banner special material stripes were ironed to strengthen the print. The outer fringe was then cut out from a model.

The result of the new technology was an excellent and faithful copy of the original, ready to take its place in the exhibition. The Museum even completed a second copy to be made available on loan to other, thematically connected exhibitions.

The Klaus Synagogue – New Exhibitions

The Story of the Jewish Museum in Prague

In June 1996 an exhibition was opened commemorating the history of the Jewish Museum in Prague. It records its founding by Dr. S. Hugo Lieben in 1906, the establishing of the Museum's collections including their expansion during the tragic circumstances of the Second World War between 1942 and 1944 and the reopening of the Museum exactly fifty years ago in 1946. The exhibition contains many of the lesser-known items and documents from the Museum collection. Its main aim is to document the lives and work of the founders and creators of the institution, many of whom were to become victims of persecution during the War, and whose achievements have still not yet been fully recognised. The exhibition is intended as an act of respect to these figures and an acknowledgement of their legacy, on which the current Museum is based.

The History of Synagogue Textiles from the 19th and Beginning of the 20th Century.

This exhibition will take place in September and October 1996 on the occasion of the international symposium of ICOM (International Council of Museums) in Prague. It will include a selection of rare Torah curtains and mantles from the

collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague, recurring through the decoration of Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo, while maintaining the traditional design of synagogue textiles.

Ruth Levin "The Peace of the Desert"

With this exhibition of her latest watercolours and paintings, which is being prepared for November 1996, the well-known Israeli painter will return once again to the city of her birth. She left Prague in 1935 with her family to go to Palestine, and later studied in Jerusalem, London and Paris. Today her work can be found in numerous private and public collections in Israel, America, Europe and Australia. The exhibition includes paintings inspired by the Judea mountains, the area of the Dead Sea, Negev, Sinai, and also Jordan and Egypt. The work is full of the fascinating atmosphere of the desert, clear light and rich shade.

The Torah Scrolls from Czechoslovakia

In the first half of the 1960s more than 1500 Torah scrolls were moved from Czechoslovakia to England, where they found refuge in Westminster Synagogue in London. The scrolls had come from Jewish communities in Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia destroyed by the Nazis and, together with other items from these communities, were brought to the Central Jewish Museum established in Prague by the occupying German administration.

After research and restoration had been carried out on these rare items (performed by the specially created Memorial Scrolls Committee) the scrolls were given on permanent loan to important institutes and Jewish communities throughout the world.

Recently, the Jewish Museum in Prague has received enquiries from some of these communities, predominantly in the United States, who received the Torah scrolls from Czechoslovakia. They expressed interest in knowing more about the history and current situation of the towns from where the scrolls originated. The Jewish Museum in Prague has in its care numerous synagogue objects which share the same origin as the Torah scrolls. Consequently, it would be extremely happy to establish contact with other Jewish communities in the world which have in their care scrolls or other items from the dissolved Bohemian and Moravian synagogues. It would welcome any information which would be of help in following the fate of this heritage.

Sponsorship

The Museum has established successful cooperation with The Rich Foundation in Paris (Executive Director Avner Azulay), which played a large part in bringing to fruition several projects important for the Museum's further activity. The Rich Foundation helped to finance a study trip for the Museum's curator of silver at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It also supported a project to develop the Museum's computer system. Recently, the Foundation co-financed the purchase of the Aleph library program (the supplier is the Israeli company Ex Libris), which will prove extremely important in improving the quality of services provided by the Museum library to those interested, both in the Czech Republic and abroad.

The 90th Anniversary of the Museum's Foundation

This year the Jewish Museum in Prague celebrates its 90th anniversary. During its existence it has ranked among the most important institutions of its kind in the world. In order to celebrate this occasion there will be, in addition to the exhibition in the Klaus Synagogue, a ceremonial dinner will be held on the 29th of August and a one-day seminar with international participation will take place in the Educational and Cultural Centre of the museum. President Havel has promised to be present at the celebration, along with a host of other dignitaries from political and cultural spheres in the Czech Republic and abroad.

The Pinkas Synagogue

The newly reconstructed memorial to more than 77,000 Czech victims of the Holocaust was opened on Yom ha-Shoah, the 16th of April, in the presence of the American, German and Austrian Ambassadors and a representative from the Israeli Embassy. Work was begun on the memorial in 1992 and finished in March 1996.

Important Visitors to the Museum

In January 1996 the President of Israel, Ezer Weizmann, visited the Czech Republic with his wife. During their stay he visited the Jewish community in Prague while Mrs. Weizmann toured the area of the Jewish Museum. Holder of the Nobel Peace Prize Elie Wiesel also came to the Jewish Museum during his first visit to the Czech Republic in May 1996.

The American Friends of the Jewish Museum in Prague

In May 1996 the American Friends of the Jewish Museum in Prague was founded in cooperation with the Project Judaica Foundation (president Mark Talisman). All information on membership procedures and advantages can be obtained from the following address:

Judaica Project Foundation, 900 Second Street, NE, Suite 205, Washington D.C. 2002,

Phone: 001/202/0882, fax: /371 0898.

The New Shop in the Maisel Synagogue

The Jewish Museum is trying to meet the large demand from visitors for souvenirs of Jewish Prague. For this purpose it is working with the English company Museum Stores, which opened a shop on the premises of the Maisel Synagogue in June 1996. Apart from publications, posters, postcards and other such goods visitors can also buy replicas of rare items from the collections, including very attractive goblets, hand-embroidered Sabbath covers, Tefillin bags, and so on. Moreover, the shop will be reconstructed in order to increase the level of sales and thereby meet visitors demands.