

NEWSLETTER 1998/1

Exhibition in the Klaus Synagogue and the Ceremonial Hall

March 1998 saw the opening of the exhibition Jewish Customs and Traditions - The Course of Life, which was installed in the gallery of the Klaus Synagogue and in the Ceremonial Hall of the Burial Society. During preparation of the exhibition space, certain alterations were made to the interior of the Ceremonial Hall with the aim to restore as many of the original qualities of the building as possible. On the basis of period photographs and surveys it was possible to partly restore original paintings from 1908, to repair and fill display cabinets, and to open up a previously blocked view from the Ceremonial Hall to the Old Jewish Cemetery.

Thematically, the exhibition The Course of Life is directly linked to the exhibition housed in the main nave of the Klaus Synagogue which is devoted to Jewish festivals and to the significance of the synagogue. The newly opened show offers the public a clear and attractive introduction to the everyday life of the Jewish family and to the customs connected with each stage of life.

The gallery of the Klaus Synagogue contains exhibits associated with birth, circumcision, bar mitzvah, wedding, divorce and the Jewish household. The Ceremonial Hall (basement and first floor) offers an in-depth treatment of the following related themes: illness and medicine in the ghetto, death, ritual washing and dressing of the dead, burial and remembrance of the dead.

A separate theme is based on Jewish cemeteries in Bohemia and Moravia and the Jewish cemeteries in Prague. Attention is also focused on the organisation and activities of the Prague Burial Society.

The exhibition provides the public with an opportunity to see 349 rare exhibits from the collections of the Jewish Museum which originate both from Prague and from other areas in Bohemia and Morava. It forms an important part of a comprehensive presentation of Jewish customs and traditions and is the most complete and extensive of its kind to have ever been presented in the Czech Republic. The Jewish Museum is preparing a catalogue to accompany the exhibition with a short text and photographs of the most interesting exhibits. The exhibition is curated by Dr. Alexander Putík and Dr. Eva Kosáková.

The new display marks a significant expansion of the exhibition programme of the Jewish Museum. Above all, it completes the thematically arranged selection of exhibits displayed in other historic buildings in Prague - the Klaus Synagogue, the Maisel Synagogue (The History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from the late 10th to the late 18th century) and the Pinkas Synagogue (Children's Drawings from Terezín). With the exhibition The Course of Life, the Jewish Museum has come close to accomplishing the goal of its exhibition programme - to present the life of the Czech and Moravian Jewish community as an integral part of the Central European region and to place it within the wider historical, cultural, social and political context. This goal will be fully accomplished by the end of 1998 with the opening of the second part of the historical exhibition in the Spanish Synagogue (The History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia from the 18th century to the present day).

Restoration work in the Spanish Synagogue

Work is successfully continuing on the overall reconstruction of the Spanish Synagogue, which this year celebrates its 130th anniversary of its founding. In

February, the heating installation was completed and the floors were treated so as to prevent rising damp. At present, the difficult task of restoring glass cabinets and historically valuable murals is being carried out. The photograph shows the restoring of a stucco painting inside the dome of the Spanish Synagogue, 26 metres above the ground.

Donations towards the renovation of the Spanish Synagogue may be sent to the Jewish Museum account: no. 195 450 830 257/0100, address: Komerční banka a.s., Spálena 51, 110 00 Praha 1.

Discovery of tombstone fragments from the medieval Jewish Cemetery in Prague

In late 1997 a significant discovery was made of fragments of medieval tombstones from the Jewish Cemetery in the New Town of Prague. This cemetery, known as the Jewish Garden, was established in the mid-13th century at the latest and was probably the earliest Jewish cemetery in Prague. It was closed down in 1478.

Previously, the only concrete evidence for the existence of the cemetery consisted of a few fragments of Jewish tombstones found in 1866 during construction of the Freeman's Club in Vladislavova Street. About 10 fragments were transferred to the Old Jewish Cemetery in the Old Town where they were placed on the wall of the Klaus Synagogue. The earliest decipherable dates on the tombstones are 1346 and 1351.

The new and unexpected discovery of tombstone fragments occurred during reconstruction work in the basement area of the house U Řečických in Vodičkova Street which is not far from Vladislavova Street. Parts of the marly limestone tombstones had been used for the construction of an arch in the north basement of the house. Of the material that was found, 21 fragments bearing Hebrew inscriptions and one which was unmarked were selected. Several tombstone fragments are on display in the newly opened exhibition in the Ceremonial Hall. Mediaeval Jewish tombstones were also recently found in Olomouc (Moravia) and Cheb (North Bohemia). The above finds will be focused upon in a special essay in the year-book of the Jewish Museum *Judaica Bohemiae*.

Jewish Museum Photoarchive

The Jewish Museum Archive contains about 40,000 photographic images of all kinds. Among other things, it documents collection items, museum exhibitions, synagogues and cemeteries, covering the period from the late 19th century to the present.

The material from the pre-war and wartime years is of particular factual and historical value. This is the case for example with the collection of slides that belonged to one of the founders of the Jewish Museum, Dr. Hugo S. Lieben, which contains a number of unique turn of the century images of sections of the Jewish Town of Prague no longer in existence. Also of note is the collection of photographs of synagogues, cemeteries, prominent Jewish buildings and settlement plans acquired from Jewish communities outside Prague. These photographs were compiled by the cultural and educational department of the Prague Jewish Community in 1942 in connection with the break-up of Jewish communities and the closing down of synagogues. The material was then

transferred to the Central Jewish Museum which was established by the Nazis at that time.

The wartime collection includes amongst other things photographs documenting the activities associated with the Treuhandstelle which was the organization connected with assigned for the collection and management of confiscated Jewish property that had belonged to individuals and Jewish institutions. The museum's archive collection also contains a copy of the Auschwitz Album which the museum acquired after the Second World War. This includes reproductions of photographs taken by the Nazis at Auschwitz, the originals of which are now stored in the Yad Va-shem Memorial in Jerusalem.

After the Jewish Museum renewed its activities after the war the photoarchive continued to regularly document its exhibitions and items from its collections. In the 1960s, while the State Jewish Museum was in existence, the collection was enriched by a set of photographs of Jewish sites in Bohemia and Moravia. A smaller section of the Jewish Museum's photoarchive consists of documentary films on Palestine and on various Jewish organisations, in addition to drama productions dealing with Jewish themes. The Jewish Museum devotes a great deal of care to the photoarchive. A newly built photography depository was opened in September 1997 and a database is currently being designed in order to create optimum conditions for the registration and research of archive material.

New depository for rare synagogue textiles

The Jewish Museum completed the construction of a new depository in the Maisel Synagogue at the end of 1997. The depository is designed for the museum's most valuable synagogue textiles dating from the early 17th and 18th centuries. The museum has installed a range of cases with spacious drawers in which about 500 synagogue curtains will be placed in storage. In addition, there is now a stand for 50 selected Torah mantles and special air-tight glass cabinets for the permanent storage of Torah crowns.

Recording in the Pinkas Synagogue

The devout nature of the memorial to the Czech and Moravian Jewish victims of the Holocaust in the Pinkas Synagogue is to be heightened from the Spring of 1998. Visitors will have the opportunity to hear recordings of the names of victims being read out by two celebrated Czech actors - Vlasta Chramostová and Radovan Lukavský. In total, 500 names were selected. The actors state each forename, family name, place of birth and age of death, as well as the concentration camp in which the victim perished. The readings will alternate with the prayers El male rahamim and Shemah Yisrael as recited by Solomon Katz. The Jewish Museum believes that this will be well-received by the public and that it will also encourage tourists to appreciate the devout nature of the memorial.

Jewish Museum collection in Sweden

Following months of intensive work, Jewish Museum staff have prepared an extensive two-year travelling exhibition of the Museum's collection of Judaica. The first show, entitled Jewish Prague, was opened in late January 1998 in the



Princ Eugens Waldemarsudde Museum in Stockholm. It contains about 250 rare exhibits from various areas in Bohemia and Moravia - Torah scrolls, synagogue curtains, silver artefacts such as spice boxes and Torah pointers, rare manuscripts, prints and portraits mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries. From Sweden the show is heading for New Zealand and is to end in Australia.

Bar-Ilan University lectures in Prague

On 28 December 1997 a one-day series of lectures by the Bar-Ilan University took place in the headquarters of the Jewish Community in Prague. This was organised by the Educational and Cultural Centre of the Jewish Museum and was held under the auspices of Raphael Gvir, the Israeli Ambassador to Prague. The common theme of the lectures was Hanukkah, the festival of lights. The intensive programme involved contributions from the Chief Rabbi of Prague Karol Sidon, the Ambassador Raphael Gvir and guests from Israel - the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Israel Meir Lau, the rector of Bar-Ilan University Prof. Moshe Kaveh, and Prof. Daniel Sperber, also from Bar-Ilan University. Variety was given to the discussions in the form of a concert by the Prague group Mishpacha.