

## NEWSLETTER 2002/4

### **Museum exhibitions reopened**

On 15 October 2002, the Jewish Museum reopened its exhibitions and the Old Jewish Cemetery. Only the Pinkas Synagogue remains closed; necessary repairs here are expected to take another few months (see below for details). Museum operations were discontinued for over two months as a result of the flood in August (for more information see the Museum's website: [www.jewishmuseum.cz/newsletter/a023.htm](http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/newsletter/a023.htm)). The flooding of basement areas caused rising damp in the naves of the Museum's historic synagogues, and it was not possible to display rare items from the Museum's collections in such unsuitable conditions. The exhibitions were restored to their former scope only after dampness levels had fallen and the affected areas had been dried and disinfected. The Old Jewish Cemetery has a new pathway which is longer than the previous one and leads through many picturesque parts of the cemetery. In addition, regular concerts of classical music are once again being held in the Spanish Synagogue.

### **Repairs to the Pinkas Synagogue**

The reconstructed Pinkas Synagogue memorial to the victims of the Shoah from Bohemia and Moravia reopened in 1996, after being closed for over 25 years. On the walls of this building are written the names of the 80,000 victims of the Nazi genocide. Unfortunately, this building suffered more flood damage than any other Jewish site in Prague's former Jewish Quarter.

The nave and south-west vestibule of the Pinkas Synagogue were flooded with contaminated groundwater and mud to a height of 1.3 metres, and water also seeped through to the wall separating the nave from the aisle. Also damaged were the artificial marble of the 18th century bimah (platform) and the aron ha-kodesh (Holy Ark). The underfloor heating system was completely destroyed and the banister lights were seriously damaged.

The inscriptions on the affected walls have remained in place, but the smooth, compact surface, which serves as a base for the letters, has been hindering the drying process. Water has risen by absorption, and mould has started to appear on the walls.

The inscriptions are also at risk due to the fact that binding material and, in particular, salts have been washed off, and the structure has been impaired. Although, according to expert assessments, the Pinkas Synagogue is not in danger of collapse, the many cracks that have appeared in the ground and first floors of the building, including the vault, should not be underestimated. Structural problems are being assessed on a continual basis and the existing pathway in the Old Jewish Cemetery that leads around the Pinkas Synagogue has been replaced by a new one.

The first emergency restoration work was carried out by Museum staff with the co-operation of external experts immediately after the removal of floodwater on 19 August. Expert staff cleaned the entire building by using a combination of special substances.

In addition, they applied an anti-mould spray to the walls and, in certain spots - particularly by the eastern wall where there are no inscriptions - scraped off part of the plaster. The entire area was then immediately dried by using ventilators. The whole area is undergoing a constant process of dehumidification, with the accumulated water being taken away through a pump. Special attention is being devoted to the bimah and Holy Ark.

An almost 20-strong team (led by climatologist Jan Červenák ) was set up at the beginning of September with a view to determining how restoration work should proceed. This team consists of top experts from various specialized fields, including restoration and conservation experts, diagnosticians, architects and construction engineers. All the work is being carried out in consultation with the State Institute for Heritage Protection.

In October, probes were carried out in the walls in order to establish the content of substances absorbed by floodwater. There has also been an ongoing analysis of microflora, the results of which are being used as a basis for treating the walls. Significant reductions in the amount of water in the walls has been achieved by removing floor tiles, as well as the water-saturated insulating layers and destroyed heaters underneath. This work will be completed by the end of November. The floor will be dug out as far as the granite base and this will be followed by an archaeological investigation. In view of the rare nature of the inscriptions, all related work is being carried out under special conditions with emphasis being placed on preventing the spread of dust and on minimizing vibrations. A new floor will be laid after new heaters have been installed; this must fit in with the historical, aesthetic and functional qualities of the site. A combination of clay slate and natural ceramics is currently being considered; the same material should also be used for the gallery floor.

It is not possible, however, to completely envisage the course of the repair work in the Pinkas Synagogue. This may be considerably influenced by a negative development in the structural state of the building and the future state of the inscriptions, too. In the winter period, the temperature of the area will be set at 5 degrees Celsius in order to prevent water freezing in the plaster. It cannot be said with any certainty, however, whether it will be possible to save the inscriptions that have been impacted by the water. As this will probably not become clear until next Spring, the inscriptions have been photographically documented in detail, so that they can be exactly reconstructed where

necessary.



According to the current schedule, all reconstruction work should be completed by next August, which is when the Pinkas Synagogue should be reopening. By then, the banister lights in the Shoah memorial will have been installed and visitors will be able to see the permanent exhibition of children's drawings from Terezín, which is located on the upper floor of the building.

The damage to the Pinkas Synagogue has brought about great public interest and involvement in the Czech Republic and abroad. Although most of the costs linked to repairs will be covered by insurance, the Jewish Museum in Prague has received promises of financial assistance for related activities - in respect of the Pinkas Synagogue from the US World Monuments Fund, the Czech-German Future Fund and from the city of Hamburg. Donations have also been received from individuals. Our thanks go to all those who have contributed towards the restoration of the



Pinkas Synagogue. Donations may be sent to any of the Jewish Museum's accounts:

- k : acc. no. 195414380237/0100
- US\$: acc. no. 195420830257/0100
- EUR: acc. no. 510091870297/0100

Please state the variable symbol number 1382002 when making a donation.

Leo Pavlát  
Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague

**“Michal Singer: Paintings from 1999 to 2002” New exhibition in the Robert Guttman Gallery**



Since May 2002, the Robert Guttman Gallery (located in the Museum's administrative centre at U Staré školy 3, Prague 1) has undergone a number of building alterations which have been designed to improve the climatic and heating conditions of the exhibition hall. The standard radiators have been replaced by a state-of-the-art overhead heating and cooling system. In addition, we have connected a humidifier and dehumidifier

device which is regulated by a central computer system located in the basement. The gallery was originally scheduled to reopen on 14 August 2002, but this date had to be put forward as a result of the August flood, which left the basement areas of the Museum's administrative centre inundated with water and caused damage to all the central air-conditioning facilities. The gallery could not reopen until the damp walls of the exhibition hall had been dried and air-conditioning units had been temporarily connected. The gallery finally reopened on 6 November, on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition of paintings by the Prague painter Michal Singer. The exhibition is curated by Arno Pařík and runs until 26 January 2003.



Michal Singer's paintings leave no-one feeling indifferent. They are immediately recognizable, distinct, expressive, personal and compelling. Basing his work on specific personal experiences, Singer tries to capture the original inspiration in an unrestrained pictorial expression. The narrative content of his paintings has its roots in specific events which, however, have taken on a symbolic significance. They usually depict the figure of a solitary pilgrim, wandering the city streets at night or through an imaginary landscape. Singer is 'seemingly' not too concerned about the formal side of his paintings; the only thing of importance for him is the potency of the experience and the spontaneity of its expression. Singer's paintings are therefore reviving the old tradition of modernism, intensified by an uncommon energy and visionary spirit.



After leaving high school, Michal Singer (b. 1959) read philosophy at Charles University and was then employed as a stoker. After the fall of Communism in November 1989 he worked as a graphic artist and art editor. Since 1993 he has been active as a freelance artist. His published works include a book of drawings (*Co jsem viděl...*), poetry and essays, drawings for the arts columns of *Literární noviny* and illustrations of poetry by Zbyňek Hejda. A collection of Singer's poems and lithographs (*Shell*) was published in 2001. More information on the exhibition is featured on the Museum's website.



### **Golem 2002 / 5763 Project**

A festival of culture entitled The Golem 2002/5763 Project was held in Prague from 3-27 October 2002. Established by the Argentinian Ambassador to the Czech Republic Juan Eduardo Fleming, the project was inspired by the poem *El Golem* by the renowned Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges. This was translated into Czech in a student competition (won by Jan Jícha, a Charles University student) and inspired various cultural events. The entire project received the support of President Václav Havel whose introductory remarks prefaced the project catalogue. It was organized by the Argentinian Embassy, Charles University in Prague and the Jewish Museum's Education and Culture Centre in association



with the Jewish Community of Prague.

This broadly conceived cultural project was launched with an opening of paintings and sculptures by Argentinian and Czech artists at the Prague Academy of Art, Architecture and Design. Visitors here also had an opportunity to view the audio-visual programme *Buenos Aires and Prague* and the television documentary *Golem and Golems*. Four classic films based around the Golem

were then screened at the National Film Archive cinema Ponrepo.

The Jewish Museum's Education and Culture Centre hosted a one-day seminar, *The Golem in Religion, Science and Art*, at which eight papers by Czech and foreign participants and a number of discussions highlighted the Golem phenomenon in the above-mentioned fields. The seminar was introduced by Maria Kodama de Borges, the widow of Jorge Luis Borges, who also participated in all the organized events.

The festival continued with a concert in the Jeru-salem Synagogue. The first part included the world premiere of Homage to the Golem, a work for piano and guitar with the voice of J. L. Borges, along with other pieces performed by the Argentinian duo Sivak and Müller. The final part comprised a performance of Sephardic songs by Jana Lewitová and Vladimír Merta.

The Golem project concluded with a performance in the State Opera House of the ballets Sinfonietta, From my Life and The Golem. This special evening also marked the 75th birthday of Pavel Šmok , the artistic director of the Prague Chamber Ballet and the choreographer of the ballets.

The Golem project met with considerable public interest and attracted a great many visitors. The seminar in the Museum's Education and Culture Centre drew attention to the rich symbolism of the Golem - including its religious and philosophical dimensions, science and art and contemporary issues, such as robots, computers, the internet, cybernetics and artificial intelligence. This highlighted the extreme relevance of the topics covered. Next year, therefore, the project organizers will be publishing a collection of seminar contributions with a view to conveying the subject matter to the general public.

To no less an extent, the Golem project also contributed to an awareness of the common cultural foundations of apparently distant countries such as the Czech Republic and Argentina.

Miloš Pojar, Director of the Education and Culture Centre of the Jewish Museum in Prague

### **Meeting of the Association of Users of the Aleph Library System in the Jewish Museum**

As the end of October, the Jewish Museum's Education and Culture Centre hosted an international meeting of the Association of Users of the Aleph Library System (SUALEPH).



Aleph is a library system that was developed by the Israeli company ExLibris. The Jewish Museum Library is gradually publishing catalogue entries on documents in its holdings and, in the future, intends to make the catalogue available on the internet by using the Aleph system. The SUALEPH association was founded in the Czech and Slovak republics in the 1990s to encourage the sharing of implementation experience

and the establishment of common user requirements in relation to the Aleph development company. The Prague meeting was attended by representatives of leading Czech and Slovakian libraries. During a break in the meeting, the participants had an opportunity to look round the Jewish Museum's Library.

## New publications

### Jewish Prague

The Jewish Museum has recently published a new guidebook entitled Jewish Prague which contains 120 full-colour photographs. This book, written by art historian Arno Pařík, provides a clear overview of the history and topography of this ancient city and showcases its most important Jewish sites. The text includes concise yet comprehensive information on the history of the Jews in Prague with reference to individual historical periods.

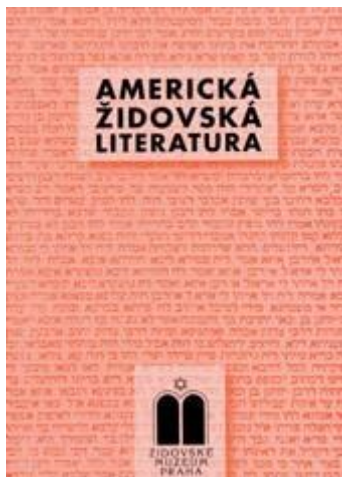
The list of sites featured in the book includes 15 synagogues and prayer halls (of which four still serve their original use and five are part of the Jewish Museum site), as well as eight Jewish cemeteries. There is also information on a number of Jewish institutions and organizations, including kosher restaurants.

The main focus of the book's attention is the history and sites of the Prague Jewish Town (Josefov). However, it also notes the existence of seven former suburban Jewish communities (Libeň, Smíchov, Karlín, Vinohrady, Žižkov, Michle and Bubny), including their synagogues and cemeteries.

The book is beautifully designed and comes in 6 language versions (English, German, French, Italian, Spanish and Czech). It is available in all the Museum's retail areas and on its website at [www.jewishmuseum.cz/shop](http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/shop).

### American Jewish Literature

This collection of lectures, compiled by Hana Ulmanová from the Philosophy Faculty of Charles University, features a series of lectures given between October 2001 and June 2002 at the Education and Culture Centre of the Jewish Museum in Prague. Individual essays contain 9 lectures focusing on the unique contribution of American Jewish literature in the 20th century, with references to Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Chaim Potok, Philip Roth and American Jewish female writers. A special chapter is dedicated to American literature on the Holocaust. This collection comprises 90 pages and is published in Czech.



### Jewish Museum acquisitions in 2002

The art collection has been gradually supplemented on the basis of purchases (from auctions and private collections) and donations. One outstanding

acquisition is a portrait of the French expressionist painter Chaim Soutine by Mané Katz, probably dating from 1921. Also noteworthy are three sketches by Leo Haas, which were made at the beginning of his career (1921-22); until now, none of this artist's early work has been represented in the Museum's collection. Donations have included several drawings and linocuts by Karel Fleischmann, dating from the 1930s. Part of the collection has been completed by drawings by Prof. Aleš Veselý, whose work will be showcased in the Robert Guttman Gallery in 2003. Another purchase is that of





an oil painting ("On the Roots", 1999) by the contemporary artist Michal Singer. The metal collection has been supplemented with a number of smaller acquisitions, such as a silver filigree spice box of German provenance from the late 19th century, a Pesach glass and a gilt dish made of cased glass, which stems from a 19th century Czech workshop. An interesting acquisition is that of a cast brass Sabbath lamp, dating from the 18th century, which has untraditional carved decorative features – in terms of shape and ornamentation, the first of its kind in the Museum's collection.

The textile collection has received a unique donation – a bride's wedding dress, dating from 1896, made of creamy white silk with floral appliqué.

### Concert for volunteers

On 9 December, the Museum Director Leo Pavlát thanked the more than one hundred volunteers who helped out in the Museum's cleanup operation in the wake of the flood in August. This expression of thanks was made on the occasion of a special concert in the Spanish Synagogue in Prague, at which Sephardic songs were performed by Jana Lewitová and Vladimír Merta.

### Prominent visits

- Deputy Foreign Minister of the State of Israel Rabbi Michael Melchior
- Culture Minister of the City of Hamburg Dr. Daňa Horáková
- Their Royal Highnesses, the Grand Duke Henri and Grand Duchess Maria Teresa of Luxembourg
- Representatives of the European Council of Museums Lola Mitjas and Ulla Keding Olofsson
- Madeline Albright, former US Secretary of State
- Arie Hahn, Secretary General of the Knesset
- The wives of participants of the Prague NATO Summit Meeting in Prague

