

The Spanish Synagogue reopening to the public after reconstruction – with a new exhibition that charts the last 200 years of Jewish history in the Bohemian lands

PRAGUE, 10 December 2020 – After more than a year and a half of reconstruction, the Jewish Museum in Prague will be re-opening the Spanish Synagogue to the public on Wednesday, 16 December. At a cost of several tens of millions of Czech crowns, the ambitious reconstruction has expanded the exhibition space to provide an additional 600 square metres. Among other things, it has provided barrier-free access to all of the synagogue's three floor areas. Following on from the previous show at the synagogue, a new modern exhibition ("Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 19th–20th Centuries") has been put together as part of the reconstruction project. The focus of the new exhibition is on the history and culture of the local Jewish community between the 19th and 20th centuries. The architecturally unique Spanish Synagogue will continue to be used as a venue for separate evening programs, in particular for concerts of classical music.

Leo Pavlát, the director of the museum, said the following about the new exhibition: "Conceived as a long-term exhibition, the new show will guide the visitor through the history of the immense upheavals that the Bohemian and Moravian Jewish community has gone through in the past two centuries. After the granting of equality – which was supposed to make the Jews forget about the previous centuries of discrimination – civic emancipation enabled them full participation in society. This auspicious period of flourishing came to an end with the apocalypse of the Shoah, which saw the death of two-thirds of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia. Hopes for a fresh start after the Second World War were dashed by the antisemitic Communist regime. All of these aspects can be experienced by visiting the new exhibition. It features unique pieces of Judaica and other three-dimensional objects, documents, films and photographs. In addition, it makes use of innovative audiovisual and interactive elements with respect to the unique space of the synagogue. An important new feature of the exhibition is the attention it pays to the history of the Jews between 1945 and 1989, as well as the subsequent period. I believe that this previously neglected chapter of recent Czech history will be of particular interest to local visitors."

The previous exhibition in the Spanish Synagogue opened to the public more than 20 years ago. After such a long time, it has been necessary to carry out technical improvements to the building and also to re-conceive the exhibition, which as a whole no longer met current museum requirements. In addition to expanding the exhibition area and providing barrier-free access, some of the interior elements were repaired, moisture was removed from part of the perimeter masonry walls, and the climate-control conditions inside the building were improved. Following on from the reconstruction and building alterations, restoration work was carried out and new display cases and digital kiosks containing audiovisual elements were installed.

The new exhibition in the Spanish Synagogue contains 58 professionally restored metal artefacts, 13 types of woodwork elements, 24 new all-glass display cases, and 26 audiovisual elements. Barrier-free access has been provided to all three levels of the exhibition space, which was made possible by installing a stairway platform lift in the entrance hall.

Most of the exhibition equipment is made from glass in various forms, which contributes to the aesthetic quality of the entire exhibition. All of the added glass elements serve as almost invisible information carriers. The frameless all-glass display cases are hermetically sealed and do not take up much space visually, thus making it possible to view each exhibit from various sides and contributing to the elegant tone of the space. The other interior elements of the exhibition are

made from wood. The wooden benches with touch screens match the style of the restored historic benches on the ground and upper floors.

The Spanish Synagogue is the most recent synagogue in the former Jewish Town in the Josefov district of Prague. It is located on the corner of Dušní and Věžeňská streets in the vicinity of the Church of the Holy Spirit. The owner of the synagogue is the Prague Jewish Community, which rents it out to the Jewish Museum in Prague. It was built on the site of the 12th-century Old Shul (Altschul), which was probably the oldest synagogue in Prague. By the second half of the 19th century, the Old Shul lacked the capacity to accommodate the needs of the reformist Jewish community that used it, which is why it was demolished to make way for a new synagogue. In 1867–68, the Society for Regulated Worship among the Israelites in Prague commissioned the building of the Spanish Synagogue on the site of the former Old Shul, to a design by Jan Bělský and Josef Niklas. The Spanish Synagogue is characterized by its remarkable Moorish interior decoration, dating from 1882–83, whose design by Antonín Baum and Bedřich Münzberger was influenced by the famous Alhambra palace of Granada.

The single-storey synagogue building has a central square plan. The main hall is surmounted by a large dome and is surrounded on three sides by built-in galleries on metal structures. The temple organ is located in the south gallery. A stained glass round window with a Star of David motif (dating from 1882–83) and the *aron ha-kodesh* (Holy Ark) are situated in the eastern wall. A distinctive feature of the interior is the stucco gilt and polychrome arabesque, which bears the influence of oriental decorative art and architecture. Stylized oriental motifs recur on the walls and in the carving decoration of the doors, banisters and gallery.

A functionalist-style building, designed by Karel Pecánek, was constructed adjacent to the Spanish Synagogue in 1935 and was used as a hospital until the Second World War. This extension contains the vestibule and the upper-floor winter prayer room, which are both connected to the synagogue. The layout of this section has remained virtually unchanged to this day.

During the Second World War, the synagogue was used as a warehouse for items confiscated from synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia. In 1955 it came into the care of the State Jewish Museum, which carried out a reconstruction of the interior in 1958–59 and installed an exhibition of synagogue textiles in 1960. The building fell into neglect after the 1970s and was closed down in 1982. Reconstruction work had to wait until the regime change in 1989. The Spanish Synagogue underwent complete renovation in the 1990s and reopened in 1998, since when it has housed the Jewish Museum's exhibition on the 19th- and 20th-century history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia.

After landscaping the paths in the Old Jewish Cemetery (2013), opening a new Information and Reservation Centre in Maiselova Street (2014), and modernizing the exhibitions in the Maisel Synagogue (2015) and Pinkas Synagogue (2018), the newly opened Spanish Synagogue is the Jewish Museum's fourth project as part of a wider transformation programme.

The Jewish Museum in Prague was founded 1906, which makes it the third oldest Jewish museum in Europe. At the core of its collection were objects from synagogues and prayer houses that had been demolished as a result of the clearance of the Prague Jewish ghetto. During the Second World War, the museum was turned into a storehouse of Nazi-confiscated Jewish ritual objects and books, which to this day remain a living reminder of the Shoah tragedy. The museum originally comprised a single building. Nevertheless, soon after the First World War, it attracted tens of thousands of visitors every year. The museum overcame the economic crisis of the 1930s, forced closure by the Nazis, nationalization by the Communist regime, and flood damage in 2002, becoming one of the most important tourist destinations in Prague.

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